For Those With Wings

Choose_The_Adventure

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Chapter 1

The old cathedral towered over me as I stood in front of the main doors, the aging statues carved meticulously into the stonework looking down on me with resentment in their lifeless eyes. They seemed to mock me, as if they were judging me for not visiting since I attended school here as a child. I dipped my head in reverence to the large statue of the named saint that stood alone on his own pedestal while giving the gesture of invitation over the main entrance.

Pushing open the heavy wooden doors with plaques of the saint the cathedral was named after, I walked through the arching doorway and into the looming annex, watching the doors close and seal me in the quiet cathedral, the flickering candles lit while the electric lights were dimmed for ambience.

The sanctuary itself was nearly devoid of people, only having a handful scattered throughout the many pews facing the large altar-like table, decorated with a white runner and candlesticks that flickered in the brief wind that I had created by opening the doors.

I kept my head down, mumbling a prayer of thanks quietly for allowing me to arrive here safely before moving towards the wooden confessional booths against the west wall. There was a small scattering of people in front of the left side of the closest booth, with only two to three people waiting to confess their sins to the priest inside. I found myself looking up at the familiar cathedral ceiling, admiring the sculptures and paintings that had been renovated and brought back to life.

Memories of my childhood friends came to the forefront of my mind, looking towards the little nooks that we'd play in before the archpriest caught us and threatened us all with punishments of cleaning the chalkboards in our classrooms. They were three brothers, one half of a sextuplet family that was split by their parents divorce, and I was by myself, an orphaned child raised by the church -- we were an unlikely quartet of

nearly limitless childish energy. I had always wondered what happened to them after I was fostered out of the children's home...

Noticing that the person in front of me left the confessional door open, I quickly signed a cross on my body with my right hand before stepping into the cramped space. I never liked confessional booths, as it seemed to be an unnecessary step and allowed the human on the other side of the blocked screen to know what was wrong with someone's life. I shook my head to clear my thoughts before reciting the confession that I had whispered so many times years before.

"Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been five years since my last confession," I muttered softly, enclosed in the soft darkness of the confessional booth, "I have sinned by not being a loving partner, for I have been deemed impure by the one I...by the one I used to love."

"My child," A male voice sounded out on the other side of the screen, his tone light and caring, yet strangely familiar, "Is this the only sin that separates you from God?"

"Yes, Father..." My mind raced as I tried to recognize the male voice before finishing the sentence, "Though there are none that come to mind, there may be smaller sins that God looks at me unfavorably for."

The booth was silent for some time before the priest on the other side spoke again.

"God forgives you of your sins, both spoken and unspoken. Be at peace and go with God's grace."

"And also with you," I barely uttered the knee-jerk response before I left the booth to see someone turn around the corner towards the entrance, his priesthood clothing making him stand out like a sore thumb amongst the regular people starting to leave the cathedral. The details of his side profile looked familiar, but I didn't want to risk calling out a name that didn't belong to him.

As he turned to face the leaving group of people, I instantly recognized him despite the spectacles resting on the bridge of his nose. The green colored inlay of his garb was also telling, but the clincher was the partial frown that seemed to be cemented onto his face.

Choromatsu...?!

I couldn't believe that one of the brothers was still here, and even more surprising was that I recognized him after all these years. The simplicity of his robes didn't betray any kind of priesthood rank, but that didn't stop me from walking up to him and lightly tugging on his sleeve. His neutral eyes swung down towards me (I hadn't realized that he had grown

that

much taller than me!) and the short moment passed in silence.

"Good night, Father," My smile died as his expression didn't change, sort of hoping to see some kind of recognition in his eyes.

"Farewell, my child. Be safe on the road," He looked towards a different person and nodded as they left.

"Ah...actually, I have nowhere to go..." My mind replayed the memory of my boyfriend shutting the door in my face, yelling at me to go cheat with someone else and locking me out of our jointly rented apartment, "Just...the clothes on my back and the hope that keeps me here."

Choromatsu looked back down at me, his eyes widening slightly. Letting the doors close after the throng of visitors left, he motioned for me to follow him. I followed his lead without a word, curious as to how the boy who used to be so quick and cunning with his pranks had grown into this silent tower of a man. I mean, it had been just over twenty years since I left...but could that much time really change a person?

The dirt on my sweatshirt caught my eye, and I looked at the floor in shame.

...yes, it could...

"Brothers, if I may have a moment," Choromatsu called out near a slightly open door by the front of the sanctuary, his voice echoing in the chamber before I heard two different noises within the sanctuary. He pushed the door open and ushered me inside, revealing a sizable office containing a large desk and two cushioned chairs arranged in front of the desk, leaving a third chair behind it to face the two. I took a seat on the right chair and tucked my hands underneath my knees, my thoughts racing to figure out if Choromatsu had called his identical brothers, or those of the clergy.

A few tense moments passed before I heard another person enter the office, their booted feet thudding against the floor until they stopped right in front of me. The two white ends of the stole swayed with the walking motion before settling back and forth into place, the tassels on each end somehow pure white despite being mere centimeters from the floor. My eyes travelled up the priest's body, noticing the heavily altered cassock underneath the flared pellegrina sitting over his shoulders. The entire ensemble was trimmed in red, accenting the black outfit.

My face lit up with recognition as I looked over the man's facial features, his dark eyes still holding that child-like playfulness as a smirk crossed his lips.

"Well hello again, (y/n)," He laughed, raising his arms slightly as if wanting a hug from me.

"Oso--! Father Osomatsu..." I bit down on my excitement, forcing my rushed stand into a horrid attempt of a curtsy. I was suddenly pulled forward into a tight hug, feeling Osomatsu's warmth against my body before cautiously wrapping my arms around him.

"Formalities can stay out there..." Osomatsu laughed as he pulled away, keeping his hands on my shoulders while looking up and down my frame, "It's been a long time, (y/n)! How are you? How have you been doing?"

"Well..." My happiness faded as the memory resurfaced, "Everything

was

fine until a few nights ago...I, uh, came back to start from the ground up. Didn't expect to find you guys

here

...at the church--"

"That

was

your voice, then," Someone called out from the doorway, my mind remembering the priest's voice from the confessional booth. I looked up to see the youngest brother, Todomatsu, lowering his eyes to me as he closed the door behind him.

Just like his older brothers, he wore a black cassock that was accented in pink with a stole tucked underneath a chemisette-like piece of fabric, pinned together in the front with some kind of upside-down bush or tree emblem. In fact, all three brothers had the emblem somewhere on their clothing.

"What do you mean...?" I met his eyes briefly, unsure of his statement.

"In the confessional," Todomatsu gave a simple smile, closing his eyes a little as he walked towards the other side of the desk.

"So, we haven't seen you in some-odd years, and you come back here partially covered in dirt," Osomatsu commented as he sat in the chair behind the desk, taking a moment to rearrange whatever loose paperwork was on the desk, "What can we help you with?"

"I didn't realize that you'd all still be here. I came here out of habit, I guess..." I couldn't look any of them in the eye, "I think I was looking for something that was familiar in the chaos that's been happening."

"And what has been happening that's causing this 'chaos'?" He pressed further.

"I...I was accused of cheating by my boyfriend and he left me with nowhere to go, despite us being together for a few years," I pressed my hands together, rubbing my thumbs in circles around each other, "I never cheated on him with any other person, but he didn't believe me and locked me out of the apartment that we rent. I couldn't grab any of my things, so they're probably all burnt up or thrown out by now..."

I tried to laugh through the last sentence, but my emotions got the better of me and I started to cry instead, pressing my hands to my face to try and hide the tears from the three men in front of me.

This was much more embarrassing than I thought it would be. Here I was, essentially complaining to my childhood friends about something silly, something that wasn't worth crying over.

"You had mentioned that you don't have anywhere to go," Choromatsu spoke up next to me after I managed to catch my breath, possibly sitting in the other chair, "Are we able to help with that at all?"

"No, it's all right," I shook my head, removing my hands from my face as I wrangled my emotions under control, "I'm sure that there's a shelter somewhere in the city that can take me in on such short notice..."

"There are a few that this church is partnered with," Osomatsu commented from the desk, "I can call around and see if they have room. Do you know how long you'd need?"

"Uh," I tried to crunch numbers quickly in my head, "Only a few days, I think? I should be able to find a new job before then."

"Then it's settled," Todomatsu lowered a hand towards me, as if asking for my own, "You can stay here until big brother finds a secure place for you."

I could only nod as I took Todomatsu's hand, feeling his slender yet strong grip underneath the white gloves he wore. He pulled me up from the chair

and escorted me out of the office, releasing my hand as he passed through the doorway and motioning for me to follow. Todomatsu brought me through the hallways connecting the large sanctuary of the cathedral to the office building behind it, opening a door into a darkened office before turning the lights on and making a grand sweeping motion towards a couch.

"It's not as comfy as a bed, but it's much better than sleeping on a hard floor," Todomatsu moved to a closet near the couch, walking by the two chairs facing a desk with a comfortable-looking office chair behind it. Two large windows were covered by blinds, the moon outside casting very little light onto them before the lights were turned on.

"It's better than where I've been sleeping..." I rubbed my arms as I waited for Todomatsu to finish whatever he was doing, watching as he brought out a pillow and blanket, setting them on top of the couch.

"The past is done, and now you can focus on what is before you," He laughed a little as he stepped away, "I'll let Father Osomatsu know that you're here for the night, as I know he'll want an update. Tomorrow, you can start anew."

"Thanks, To..Father Todomatsu," I corrected myself as I gave a small bow in respect, "I appreciate everything that you all have done for me tonight."

"Think nothing of it. I know you would do the same if our positions had been reversed," He gave a small wave as he closed the office door behind him, turning off the lights on his way. I took off my shoes and sweatshirt, folding it as neatly as I could before laying on the couch and sinking into its softness, not bothering to remove my jeans or tee shirt before covering myself with the blanket.

I could only pray that tomorrow would bring a better morning.

Chapter 2

I woke up to the sound of fingers typing on a keyboard, the noise gentle enough to not be annoying as I rubbed my eyes and stretched out my limbs before looking towards the source. Osomatsu sat in the office chair facing a computer screen, his eyes locked onto whatever he was writing before glancing over at me, the stoic look on his face breaking into a smile.

"Good morning, (y/n). How was your rest?" His fingers paused in their movement as he turned to face me.

"If I had known that this was your office, I would've asked for somewhere else to sleep..." I yawned before putting my shoes and sweatshirt on, neatly folding the blanket and tucking it back into the closet Todomatsu had retrieved it from, along with the pillow, "I didn't want to bother you with me being here."

"No worries. I don't have any meetings today, and nothing needed my attention until the afternoon," Osomatsu stood up and walked towards me, "I was able to find a shelter nearby that could take you in for the week. It's run by the nuns of our local convent, and I told them that I'd send you over whenever you woke up."

"Oh, thank you so much!" I nodded my head in respect, both happy and relieved that he was able to find somewhere on such short notice, "I'll head over immediately."

"Only if you're in a rush. You're more than welcome to stay around here for a little longer," Osomatsu lightly rested a hand on my head before removing it, "It's been a long time since we talked, and even longer since we've last seen you."

"I honestly didn't think that I'd see all three of you here. I thought that you would've left the cathedral behind and be elsewhere in the world," I lowered

my eyes towards my hands, "I mean, I'm glad that you're here...and I'm sorry that I haven't been in contact."

"It's nothing to worry about now," Osomatsu moved towards the door and opened it, waving his hand as if beckoning me to follow, "Care for an escort to your destination?"

"Are you sure?" I looked back up at him.

"Of course. Sitting in the office alone for too long never really does me any good, and I could use a nice refreshing walk from the rough night," He smiled before leaving the room, the sudden motion making me rush towards him so I wouldn't be left behind.

"I'm sorry to hear that you've had a rough night," I tried to find a conversation starter, "Is everything better now?"

"For the most part. I haven't been able to get much restful sleep lately, but now that I know you're here, I think tonight will be the best sleep that I've had in awhile," He turned down a hallway and left through a glass door that led outside, the morning sun smothered by the clouds overhead. There was a faint smell of rain on the breeze, as if reminding everyone that the partially sunny day wouldn't last.

"I'm glad..." I closed my eyes as I felt the wind gently blow through my hair, the happy feeling quickly sinking into disgust as I realized I hadn't taken a shower in a while. A sigh escaped my lips as I remembered that I had no clean clothes to change into.

"Something on your mind?" Osomatsu asked as he waved to a few people as we passed them on the street. I lowered my eyes from him to the sidewalk underneath my feet, my mind shifting to look at Osomatsu and myself from an outsider's perspective: a man of the cloth with a high reputation walking alongside a woman who was clearly homeless.

I clenched my fists tightly, feeling my nails bite into my palms. I felt so angry with myself.

Should I have tried to put up a fight, to try and prove my innocence before

he

closed the door? Of course, I should've...but I was too shocked by the accusation to process anything that was happening.

"(Y/n)," Osomatsu's stern voice cut through my thoughts, "You're bleeding."

I looked up at him before glancing down to what his gaze was locked on: my hands.

I forced them to open, the tension in the muscles hard to relax as my nails pulled away from the skin. There wasn't much blood, just a little bit under my nails and some filling the crescent indents left in my palms.

"Ah...sorry..." I tucked my hands behind my back, my shame growing even larger as I noticed people looking at me as they passed, "I wasn't paying attention."

"Come with me," Osomatsu walked ahead before turning towards the right, cutting me off and drawing me to follow him without laying a finger on me, "We can talk more freely where we're going."

"No, Father, it's all right...!" I tried to protest, but something in his eyes held my tongue as he turned to look at me. The kindness and playfulness that I had always seen were covered by something darker, something much more serious than anything he has ever allowed me to see.

Osomatsu led me towards a small park, the overcast sky reflected in the pond as a few people fished from its shore. He sat on a bench underneath one of the larger trees near the entrance, leaving enough space on the three-seater bench for me to sit on his left side. Crossing his right leg over his left and clasping his hands over his right knee, Osomatsu sat in silence as if waiting for me to speak.

"Did...did I do something wrong, Father Osomatsu?" I wilted under his gaze, the dark look he had given me previously still etched in my mind.

"Not that I'm aware of," He looked away from me, his dark hair tossed about as the wind picked up, "I'm just concerned about you, (y/n). The happy girl from my childhood has grown to be a woman full of worry and anxiety."

I bit the inside of my bottom lip as I lowered my head, the disappointed thought worming its way through my mind,

Of course he was the first one to notice...he always did when I was upset when we were kids.

"You say there's nothing that my brothers and I can do to help, but something tells me different. The way you've been acting says that you don't want to bother us for help, despite knowing that we could possibly do something about it," Osomatsu continued, "Most come to us asking for food, or sanctuary from those pursuing them. You, on the other hand, haven't...and that alone makes me worried that something else is going on."

"I..." I held my hands together as I looked up to Osomatsu, knowing how vulnerable I looked, "I think I'm pregnant with Ichiro's child..."

His dark eyes narrowed a little before closing and turning his head away, his face shifting in thought.

I waited for the condemnation to start: 'why didn't I wait until I was married to have sex?', 'having a child out of wedlock was against what I was taught', and so on. The silence dragged on before Osomatsu cleared his throat and looked back at me.

"If you are, then I know you'll make a wonderful mother," I could hear that he was restraining himself, "However, if you are not, then we'll be thankful that it wasn't developing during a difficult part of your life."

"What, no 'fire and brimstone' speech for me...?" I partially laughed, slightly relieved that he didn't jump down my throat like I was expecting

him to.

"That destination is not where you're headed, (y/n). You've still got some life ahead of you, and you're starting again where you can," Osomatsu let a reassuring smile pass over his face, his left hand moving from his knee to my right shoulder, its radiating warmth comforting and gentle, "You've only just come back into the area last night after an ordeal that has lasted days. I don't think a 'hell and brimstone' talk would do you much good right now."

I couldn't hold back the smile on my lips, laughing a little at the truth of his statement. He raised his hand from my shoulder, the smile still present as my laughter started to turn into sobbing, tears running down my cheeks as I let myself go. I hadn't let myself show my full emotions to anyone in a while and, in an instant, Osomatsu tore down that wall like he had always been able to do when we were kids. I heard him move a little closer before he wrapped an arm around my shoulders, his hand slowly rubbing circles against my back as I regained my composure.

"You look much better."

His voice had a tone of relief, catching my attention and making me look up at him with my puffy eyes, my hands still wiping away the tears.

"What do you mean...?"

"You looked tense as we approached the shelter, so I thought you needed some time to just vent," He smiled down at me, "You look much better now."

"I could never fool you, Father Osomatsu," I moved my hands away from my face, standing up from the bench before smiling down at him, "Even now."

"You couldn't fool any one of us, (y/n). You're too honest for your own good sometimes," Osomatsu followed me in standing, adjusting his cassock and leading the way out of the park.

"I don't think I'll ever be able to lie to you or your brothers..." I shook my head, keeping pace with him as he went. He hummed lightly in response before stopping me in front of an older brick building that looked like a retired school, the same building where he had cut me off before.

"Go on inside, and make sure to speak with Sister Totoko. She'll be able to help you with whatever you need, and should be able to get you the contact number for a pregnancy center for a test."

"I can't thank you enough for this, Father Osomatsu," I turned to him and gave a deep bow, smiling up at him as I stood up again.

"Let me or Sister Totoko know if there's anything else we could help with, okay?" He shifted his weight onto his left leg, returning my bow with a small nod of his head.

"I will."

I gave him another bow before entering the building, following the signs to the receptionist area for the shelter. After asking the woman at the desk for a 'Sister Totoko', I was instructed to fill out a few forms and wait while she finished up the appointment she was with. The forms were basic information, asking my name, occupation (if applicable), and general knowledge of who I was. I filled out everything that I could, reminding myself to find some fresh clothes and shower before leaving to find a job nearby. I would also need to pick up a mobile phone, a cheap one that would only accept calls.

After about half an hour passed, my name was called out by a nun wearing a black habit and veil. I gathered the paperwork and walked up to her from my seat, smiling as best as I could while acknowledging my name.

"So, you're the one that Father Osomatsu called about last night?" She barely gave me a second look as she took the forms from me, "My name is Sister Totoko. We had a bed open up, so you'll be able to stay here for a little while and there are support groups that can work with you if you have any issues you need help with."

"Ah, no...I'm not addicted to anything, or in need of anything more than some clothes and a bed for a little bit," I shook my head. She turned and walked down the hallway, pulling out a keycard from within her habit as she neared a door with a keypad next to it, leaving me to follow behind. She led me deeper into the building before speaking again.

"If you are accepted into a job, then you need to alert us to your schedule so that we can accommodate you. The lockdown begins at 8 p.m. and ends at 5 a.m., and there will be no visitors allowed without expressed permission. This is a place of recovery and rehabilitation for some and, as such, we ask that everyone respects the needs of others," Sister Totoko opened up a door that led into a common area, filled with a few couches, bookshelves, and two different televisions. Attached to the area was a dining room with a long table that probably seated about fifty people, and a galley kitchen with an open serving window.

"Here is where the kitchen, dining area, laundry, and common room are. After your first day, you will be assigned chores that are listed in the kitchen."

She swept through another door leading out of the common area and moving up the adjacent staircase, quickly ascending to the second floor. Another open door led to a corridor of bedrooms and bathrooms, ending in a fire escape. I didn't hear any loud noises from the rooms, only the soft murmuring of some people who were still sleeping.

"This is where you'll be assigned a bed. Each room has the capacity for two women, an extra long twin-sized bed each. You're responsible for the sheeting and blankets you use, and you're welcome to use your own if you have them. Each bathroom has three rooms assigned to it, but if you need to use a bathroom that is not your own, you'll need to ask those who are assigned to it if you're able to use it."

"Is there...any chance that I could use some clothes?" I risked interrupting Sister Totoko, "These are the only things I have."

"We can take a look through the donations to see if there are clothes your size," She gave the first smile I saw on her face since we met, "That

shouldn't be a problem."

After finishing the tour of the rest of the grounds, I was assigned an empty bed in Room 4 and found three different articles of clothes that fit me, as well as a pack of socks, new underwear, and a new bra that were all donated recently. I immediately grabbed a hand towel and some toiletries from the donation section before heading up to the assigned bathroom, not hearing anyone occupying it and leaving the notice on the door handle, 'Do Not Disturb'.

Turning the water handle to 'HOT', I ripped off my dirty clothes as fast as I could before getting into the shower, scrubbing myself hard with a bar of soap and using my fingernails as a replacement for a washcloth. Rinsing my hair twice to get rid of the oils, sweat, and overall gross sensations, I stepped out feeling like a different person. Yes, my skin was red and irritated from the rough scrubbing, but I didn't feel like the scum of the earth anymore.

Using the hand towel to dry myself, I pulled on the new undergarments and dressed in the donated clothing. The jeans were standard, the legs slightly flaring at the end with some bedazzling on the butt pockets, but the shirt had grabbed my attention instantly.

It was a long-sleeve shirt that had form-fitting sleeves, but the main body was loose and flowy similar to a dress, trailing down to my upper thighs. The fabric was soft to the touch, almost feeling like a sweater but the look was of a tee-shirt, and the coloring was a black gradient fading to a light tan color towards the bottom.

After putting new socks on, I headed back downstairs with my armful of dirty clothes, double-checking to see if the washer was in use. Dumping everything in there, including the new undergarments that I wasn't wearing, I started a load using a bit of the community detergent and fabric softener.

"Well...that's finally being taken care of..." I mumbled to myself before heading over to the sitting area and perusing the books, finding a novel that

I hadn't read before and curling up in a corner spot on the nearest couch.

"Adjusting well?"

I nearly jumped out of my skin when I heard Choromatsu speak from the laundry room doorway, distracting me from folding my clean and warm laundry.

"Ch--Father Choromatsu, you startled me!" I kept my voice down, my heart beating furiously in my chest. While I was reading the novel, both Choromatsu and Todomatsu had come over to the shelter to pray with the occupants and lead a small service for those that couldn't make it to the main sermon yesterday, the latter happening in twenty minutes.

"That wasn't my intention," He stifled a small laugh before the neutral look returned to his face as he backed away from the laundry room, reading my intention to leave with my folded clothes, "Will you be attending the sermon today?"

"I don't have anything planned besides looking for a place that's hiring, so yes," I nodded with a smile, partially excited to hear how my friends had grown and partially in respect.

"That's wonderful to hear," Choromatsu gave a small smile, his cheeks slightly lifting his spectacles, "I hope that your sleep last night wasn't interrupted by my brother's lack of volume control. He tends to be quite vocal the following day after preaching a sermon."

"Oh, not at all. Father Osomatsu was quiet, and I slept peacefully. Thank you for your concern," I tilted my head towards the door to the second floor, "I need to put these away, but I'll be there in the chapel shortly."

"Good to hear...and (y/n)?" He stopped himself as he started to walk away, looking back towards me with a soft smile.

I turned towards him again before he continued.

"Welcome home."

Chapter 3

"...in His Name, we pray. Amen," Todomatsu called out over the small congregation gathered in the chapel.

"Amen," the crowd echoed. As the people began to filter out of the chapel, I stayed in my seat near the back, my hands clasped together in silent prayer for the success of my job search. As I finished, I took a breath and stood up to leave the chapel, my fingers running through my unbrushed hair in an attempt to tame it from the shower earlier.

"May you find what you're looking for," I heard Todomatsu call out before I stepped through the doorway, both him and Choromatsu at the front of the now empty chapel.

"Thank you," Turning around to acknowledge his words, I nodded my head before leaving. With my banking account information tucked into my back pocket, I alerted the reception desk of what I was doing and for how long I'd be gone. I gave myself three hours to walk around the city and find somewhere to work.

The afternoon sun fought against the autumn cloud cover, the wind pulling at my hair and clothes as I walked towards where I thought would be a good place to start -- the main shopping district. I asked for any kind of job, part time or full time, regardless of the starting pay.

All of them had turned me down, possibly due to me not having any kind of communication line despite giving them the shelter's number. After hearing 'sorry but no' and seeing heads shake a negative response for two hours, I called it quits for the day with my spirits low as I wandered through the city.

Walking into a large park that was filled with laughter from children playing and light chatter from conversing adults, I dropped onto an empty

bench and buried my head in my hands, fighting off the depressive thoughts that tried to invade my mind.

I'm so useless.

I felt a few drops of cold rain hit my skin, ignoring everyone else in the park who were busy retreating into some kind of cover. Tilting my head back, I closed my eyes and let the rain pour over me, not caring if I became sick from the unprotected exposure.

I didn't know how long I stayed there, but I heard someone approach me, the rain hitting their umbrella as they came closer.

"It's not healthy for a young woman such as yourself to be out here all alone in the rain," The speaker's voice labelled them as male, his voice deep and smooth, "There's a nearby café that you could warm up at."

The rain stopped hitting my skin, opening my eyes to see that the man had moved his umbrella over me. His face froze me in place.

He looked just like Osomatsu and his brothers.

He noticed my shock, and offered his free hand to me, "You've seen this face before, then."

A wave of calm washed over me as I listened to him, only nodding as I took his hand. My mind paused at my own movements.

Why was I taking this stranger's hand? Why did he look just like the others? He

had

to be a part of the other trio that Osomatsu and the others were separated from, right?

"It's all right. I'm not going to do anything to you," The man laughed a little as my face clearly reflected what I was thinking, "I just don't want you to

get sick in this downpour. If it makes you feel more comfortable, I'll leave after you've dried off in the café."

"I...wait..." I tried to form sentences as I followed him, my hand still in his, "Are you one of Father Osomatsu's brothers?"

"Well...that's a name I haven't heard in a while," He looked down towards me, just as tall as the other three at the cathedral, "Yes, I am."

His dark hair was brushed in a similar style to Osomatsu, the light revealing a blue tint in his hair as his groomed eyebrows lifted in curiosity as our eyes met. A flash of white light flooded my mind, the pain of the sudden bright color making me flinch away as my eyes closed instinctively.

"Are you okay...?" He stopped as I rubbed my eyes with my free hand, groaning a little.

"Yeah...I guess I'm really tired from the past few days," I've had eye migraines before, but they never caused this much pain when they started, "It's been...rough."

"Hmm..." The man hummed before walking again, turning a corner and opening a door before pulling me through, "Here we are."

The smells of coffee grinds and milk flooded the air, the aroma mixed with other flavors of baked goods as my eyes readjusted to the low-light café. My stomach sounded a friendly reminder that I hadn't eaten since yesterday, the noise catching the man's attention as he looked back down to me.

"I'll...just have water, please," I muttered, feeling my soaked back pocket to realize that I didn't bring any kind of money, only the banking documents needed for a job application.

"Nonsense," He smiled and cinched the umbrella closed, leaving it in the stand by the front door before heading to the ordering line, "I don't mind paying for whatever you want."

"No, really..." I shook my head, "Just a cup of water is fine."

"Ready to order, Karamatsu?" The cashier gave a friendly smile to the man.

Karamatsu?

"Yeah, I'll have my usual and she'll have a large hot cocoa with a breakfast sandwich," He quickly took out his wallet and paid before I could object.

"Coming right up. Your total is ¥1520 and paid with exact change," She handed him a receipt before bowing, "We'll call your name when your order is ready."

"She...she said your name was 'Karamatsu'?" I finally found my voice after we sat down at a table near the corner.

"That's what it's been since I was born," He gave a wide smile, propping his chin up on his palm, "It sounds like you've already met the other troublesome three of my siblings."

"Yes, they're part of the clergy at my old church," I looked down at the table, focusing on my hands as they rubbed against each other, "I just found out last night...only got into town last night, anyway."

"Really..." His tone didn't form a question, "Well, you made it here safely, regardless of how. Are my brothers looking after you?"

"Of course," I smiled at him, "Father Osomatsu was able to find a homeless shelter that I could stay at for a little while until I'm able to get my feet back under me."

"I'm sorry to hear that you were somehow put into that kind of position in the first place," His eyebrows creased together and I saw sorrow fill his eyes, "At least my older brother is doing what he can for you. One of my younger brothers, Ichimatsu, runs a cat café nearby if you're still looking for a job. They have a high revolving employment rate, but if you're sincere about getting back on your feet as you say you are, I doubt he'll have any problem keeping you hired."

"Ichi...matsu?" I raised an eyebrow, never hearing that name before from the three.

"Ah, I guess Osomatsu didn't share much about us," Karamatsu smiled and raised a hand to scratch the back of his head, "There are six of us, but our parents divorced when we were rather young and took three of us with each of them. Osomatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu moved with our mother; they're the oldest, third-oldest, and youngest of us. Myself, Ichimatsu, and Jyushimatsu were living with our father until we were of legal age to live on our own; we're the second-oldest, third-youngest, and second-youngest."

"I think I see...So, Fathers Osomatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu became priests, and you are..." I trailed off, trying to figure out a way to ask about their jobs without sounding rude.

"No, we're not doing anything attached to that," Karamatsu leaned back, slightly shaking his head, "Not that we don't appreciate the hard work that they must've put into it. There's just too many rules to follow that make genuine worship hard to do, in our opinion. My brothers and I have jobs outside of the church. Ichimatsu has his café, Jyushimatsu likes to help with the children at the local schools, and I'm a luthier, making guitars and other stringed instruments."

"I see, and...Ichimatsu is the one you told me to see for a job?"

"That's right."

"Karamatsu?" The waitress called out his name as she brought food to the counter for him to pick up. He motioned for me to stay as he stood up from his chair, carrying the food easily over to the table and gently laying it down in front of me. I blessed the food with a quiet prayer before eating the breakfast sandwich that Karamatsu had ordered me, savoring the fresh egg and bacon between the two halves of what tasted like honey bread.

"You're late," Sister Totoko stood in front of me, her arms crossed as she looked down at me, "To be precise, you're an hour and a half later than the

time you gave us."

"I'm sorry...things didn't go as well as I was hoping for the job search, and the weather caught me off-guard," I lowered my head.

"There's not going to be a punishment as we aren't your parents, but for the safety of our tenants, we do ask that respect is given to the rules we have here," She took a step back, her light brown eyes looking into my own colored hues, "If you needed more time, then you could've called the office."

"My apologies...it won't happen again," I moved out of her office and towards the common room, only wanting to fade into the background and read until night fell. With the clock reading 4:06pm, there was some time before dinner would be served, but I wasn't in the mood to eat.

It's only my first day, and I'm messing things up already...

Grabbing the first thing I found, I buried my nose into it until someone's hand pushed the book down from my face. I was about to talk to them about both personal space and interrupting a reader until I met Choromatsu's neutral hooded eyes, barely hiding behind his glasses as he looked down at me, the frown ever present on his face.

"Will you not eat with the rest of us?" His tone was questioning, but the look in his eyes warned me to not skip the meal.

"I...I'll eat. I just lost track of time..." I muttered as I put the book away, "I didn't realize that you were coming here."

"This is one of my duties here at the cathedral," He waited until I was in front of him before moving towards the large dining table, escorting me to a seat before heading towards the head of the table. He was the only priest here, with Sister Totoko sitting on his left while the tenants gave them space.

"Let us give thanks for the food that the Lord has allowed us to prepare this night," Choromatsu began, his voice carrying in a monotone that everyone

responded to, bowing their heads as the prayer was called out over the table. I bowed my head as well, but my mind was filled with thoughts of what happened today. First thing in the morning, I was going to apply...

I didn't ask where Ichimatsu's café was!

Okay, so first thing in the morning, I was going to ask around to see if anyone knew of a cat café.

Then

, I would go apply.

Chapter 4

The sleep that I had that night was the most peaceful I've had in a long time, despite not being in my own bed. It felt like I was laying on the softest clouds in the sky, instead of the semi-firm twin bed in the shelter.

After finishing my simple breakfast of cereal and an apple, I dressed up and informed the receptionist of how long I'd be out, making sure to give myself an extra hour or so just in case something happened that I didn't expect. I wore the same pants as yesterday, thankfully dry from the unexpected soak it had from the rain, but I chose to wear the other new shirt that I was able to find in my size.

It was a long-sleeved shirt, gray in color with a spattering of sparkles on the front in a random pattern. I was definitely overdressing for whatever position I was applying for at the café, but I couldn't help it. My hand pressed against my stomach and a frown crossed my face.

I still needed to take a pregnancy test...

"Fancy seeing you here, (y/n)," A male voice cut off my thoughts as I looked around to try and figure out who was talking to me. I hadn't realized that I had walked to the small park from the previous day, the scenery startling me a little bit. I felt someone's presence to my left, and looked over to see Osomatsu in his priest garb sitting on a bench with a book in his hands.

"Father Osomatsu," I nodded in his direction, "Good morning."

"Good morning to you," He returned the nod before closing the book, focusing on me, "How did the rest of your day go yesterday?"

"Oh...it went well enough. I was told of a place that is looking to hire, so I'll be checking that out today," I glanced away, "Though...I'm not sure where it is. Your brother told me about it."

"Oh? Where did Choromatsu or Todomatsu suggest?" Osomatsu raised an eyebrow.

"Actually, it wasn't either of them. It was Karamatsu," A shiver shot down my spine as I watched Osomatsu's face fall into a look that could only be described as hatred for a split second before recovering into interest, "Father...?"

"No, it's all right. I hadn't heard his name in a while...and I wasn't expecting him to be so close," He raised a hand to his chin, his eyebrows furrowed in thought, "I guess I should go and pay him a visit. Did he tell you where you could find him?"

"No, he only took me to a local café during the downpour yesterday. I didn't want to pry much into his personal life when we had only just met," I shook my head before pointing towards the entrance to the park, "I was going to ask around to see if I could find the cat café he suggested."

"Well, I remember one opening up downtown within the past year. It's received some pretty mixed reviews about the service, but the food and adoption center they have are consistently rated high," Osomatsu stood up and tucked the book underneath his arm, "It's not too far of a walk, and I still have time left on my break. I don't mind escorting you there."

"No, Father Osomatsu, it's all right. I can just have--" I started to shake my head before he put a hand on my shoulder, turning me around and guiding me out of the park.

"It's all right, (y/n)...Call it a needless worry, but I do want to make sure that you're safe," The tone of his voice dipped into sadness.

"Father...?"

"When we had heard of what happened to you when you went to that foster home, my brothers and I were angry and worried for you," He talked in a low volume, but I could still hear every word he said, "You are like a sister to us, and any sibling would have gotten upset at what happened."

I lowered my head, trying to silence the echoes in my head of a male yelling at someone, a woman screaming back at him in retaliation. I had hoped that they would've never found out...

"There's not much that I can do right now, but please..." He lowered his head down to look at me, "Don't think that you'll bother us for asking the smallest favor, okay?"

I saw honesty in his eyes, his normally carefree face set in a solemn expression.

"Okay, I won't."

He nodded at my response before standing back up to his full height, the smile back on his face.

With him walking next to me, I could really feel the difference in our heights; he and his brothers seemed to top the chart at around 198 centimeters, while I was much shorter than them.

I started picking at my shirt, wondering what had happened to the brothers during my time away. They all seemed to have some kind of...aura...around them, but could it have been because the three were priests?

"Oh, it looks like they moved recently," Osomatsu's voice pulled me from my thoughts as he looked across the street, his hand pointing the way and directing my attention to a small storefront with two large bay windows. Both windows had cats lounging across any flat surface as they took in the morning sun, the light peeking in between the buildings at this hour. The purple lettering on the sign above the door read 'Cat Garden', and the interior design seemed to follow the purple theme.

"I wonder if that's the right one..." I tried to look past the morning sunshine reflecting off the glass. I heard Osomatsu chuckle behind me before giving a light push on my back.

"Only one way to find out. Go on," He was giving a wide smile when I turned around to look at him, "I'll stay out here. Allergic to cats, and all..."

"Oh, okay. I'll be right back!" I smiled in return before crossing the street using the closest walkway, making my way towards the Cat Garden. Opening the door let out a wave of dried chamomile and catnip smells, the scents nearly overwhelming the vehicle exhaust and stale air of the city. The bell attached to the door handle jingled softly as it shut behind me, the outside noise practically cancelled out when it completely closed.

"Welcome," A male greeted me from behind a countertop lined with carpet material, his hand gently petting one of the many cats before moving out to meet me. My eyes were drawn to the many platforms that hung from the ceiling, imitating bird cages with some cats curled up inside, sleeping on the fluffy cushions that were in each 'cage'. A long track led from the beds to a carved tree near the front of the café, more platforms carved out from the 'limbs' of the tree. The material that wrapped around the truck looked like it was a giant scratching post.

"Seating for one?" The male grabbed a menu and waited for me to confirm the party size. I had to shift my focus from admiring the interior of the café to the reason I was there.

"Oh, I was actually wondering if the café was hiring...?" I tucked some hair behind my right ear, nervous if I had the wrong café.

"We are, actually! Hold on, I'll get the owner for you," His smile grew wider as he set the menu down, making a motion for me to 'stay'. With his reaction, I could guess that Ichimatsu was the owner, and not the waiter. Suddenly left alone in the decently-sized cafe, I was able to take more of a look at the furry occupants, most of them by the front to get the late morning sun before it disappeared behind the towering buildings surrounding it.

'

Oh, it looks like they moved recently

,' Osomatsu's words rang in my head. Did the owner move his shop because the first location was bad for the cats? I heard some muted conversation

grow louder as the speakers walked closer to me from behind the door the waiter disappeared to.

"--ould really use the help, sir," I recognized the waiter's voice.

"I don't care if she's the Queen of England," A gruff voice argued, "Everyone's the same."

"You gave me a chance, so why not--" The male opened the door, cutting himself off when I came into view.

I knew it...Related to the brothers or not, I may not be given an opportunity at this place, either,

I sighed to myself as the owner came into view, wearing the same face as the other brothers, but his expression was more judgemental. His dark hair was roughed up from basic maintenance, his posture was slightly slouched, but his eyes...his dark eyes just

glared

at me from underneath hooded eyelids. I couldn't hold his gaze, looking down at the floor.

"You're looking for a job here?" I hadn't realized how close they had gotten until I heard the owner about a meter away from me.

"Yes, I am," I thought I spoke too loud at first, quieting down as I looked up at him, "I heard from Karamatsu that you were looking to hire, and I really need a job right now to get my feet back under me."

His eyelids lowered even more, his lips stretching thin, "It is true that I do need hired help...but what can you offer?"

"Anything!" I took a step forward, taking a chance. No one else had asked me the question before, always turning me away before I could offer my services, "I'll be a janitor, a waitress, or even a groomer!"

"Oh...?" The thin line of his mouth turned upwards into a mock smile, "We'll see if you're able to handle it. Come back tomorrow at 5:00 a.m., and I'll give you a trial run."

I stifled a cry of joy, turning the energy into an enthusiastic bow and thanking him for the opportunity. He merely waved me away before turning his attention towards the cats that were staring at us, moving towards them and giving each of them some attention as I handed my contact information to the waiter, thanking him as well before leaving the cat café.

Chapter 5

The remainder of the day was uneventful -- being escorted back to the shelter by Osomatsu, updating the receptionist of my potential new job, and completing the chore that I was assigned for the day. I checked the donation area for clothes that would seem appropriate for working around animals, finding a rough hand-me-down pair of jeans and a few loose tee shirts that looked a little scuffed up. I had figured that Ichimatsu would have plans for me not to be in the front of the store, so this kind of casual dress would probably be acceptable.

The sun hadn't even started to peek over the horizon when I stopped in front of the café, my sweatshirt barely keeping the cold morning wind at bay as it rushed through the corridor-like streets. Taking a deep breath, I reached out and gently knocked on the front door, the feeling of guilt welling up when I saw some of the cats flick their ears towards the sound and raising their heads a little. I wasn't told, nor did I really ask, of where to go when I got here.

A light turned on deeper in the café, illuminating some of the large room before a man opened a door towards the back, his mouth widening in a yawn before his eyes settled on me. I could almost hear his disapproval as he shuffled towards the front door, his hand dipping into his pants pocket and bringing out a ring of keys, his fingers flipping through the collection before singling one out.

I took a step back as he slid the key into the door handle, twisting it a few times before opening the door and walking away. Quickly, I closed the door behind me and waited for him to give me further instructions, but raised an eyebrow in confusion as he simply kept walking away from me.

"Umm...excuse me...?" I quietly started to ask before his glare swept back towards me.

"You're working in the back room. Start preparing the recipes and try to have everything ready by seven o'clock," The door that Ichimatsu had walked through closed behind him, hiding him from my vision. No directions on where the back room was, and no further details on what food I was to prepare. Scrambling to find where I was supposed to go, I went to each door within the main room of the café and tested each handle to see if they were unlocked.

Testing the last door in the far back, it swung open easily and revealed part of a kitchen hidden by the walls that extended just past the doorway. It was quiet and cold, but the entire area was completely clean. There were cat food dishes neatly stacked up on one side of the kitchen, completely separate from the different sized food plates that were on the opposite side. Each stack had a label hanging beneath it, clearly marking each space for specific dishes. The kitchen layout was barely any different from the one at the shelter: a sink with three sections and a faucet with a spray attachment, a few cleaning liquids stored in a shelving unit in the corner that were labeled, and a wide array of cookware.

Hanging over what looked to be a preparation station was a binder with 'MORNING INSTRUCTIONS' on the front cover. I took it off the hook and opened it to see a detailed outline of what was expected each weekday and every weekend, the outline marking page numbers that could be easily referenced in case the reader became lost or unsure. I lightly smiled before setting it down and reading over what was scheduled for today: Wednesday.

'FOR CATS: Adults get one half can of wet food mixed with one half cup of dry food, kittens get one half canned food. Sophie (pink collar) has a special diet and needs her food prepared accordingly: One half can of dietary wet food for sensitive stomachs, and feed her after the others in the private room by the 'EMPLOYEE ENTRANCE'. Ensure that no other cats are in there before you close the door.

'FOR HUMANS: Pick up the previous night's order from the bakery, prepare the breads with their cheese counterparts for appetizers. After the order is picked up, stop by the fruit market and gather the daily ingredients needed for the café menu.'

I looked towards the clock hanging over the doorway to see that it was 5:23am, and started gathering the cat bowls and taking the food from the cabinets that were highlighted in the diagram. There wasn't a set time for the food for the cats, but I figured it should be done sooner rather than later. As I started to open up the cans, I began to hear the animals in the next room start to stir. Loading up the dishes onto two trays, I carried them out and put them where the cats were gathering, seemingly already trained to go to where the food would be instead of crowding around my feet. Spotting the pink collar around the neck of a short-haired tortoiseshell cat, I picked her up gently and took the diet food bowl that I had set aside into the specified room, turning on the lights before I closed the door.

Gathering up the water dishes, I dumped the old water and cleaned them before refilling each dish with clean water from the designated faucet. With a glance at the clock, I confirmed that I only had only a few minutes before I needed to leave to pick up everything else. Taking in a deep breath, I put the full water dishes down for the cats and made my way towards the front door.

"I'm going out...!" I called out loudly, not wanting to yell and scare the cats. With silence as the store's response, I unlocked the front door and shuddered from the brisk wind that hit me with the full force of a chilly autumn morning. Gripping the directions that were provided from the notebook, I found my way towards the bakery that held the order.

I tried to pull on the door, but it was locked. The placard on the window said that the store opened at 6 a.m., so I was definitely early. I would definitely need to invest in a watch...

"...you're good enough..." A husky voice whispered next to me.

"I'm sor--?!" Caught off-guard while turning to face the speaker, I felt two hands shove against my right shoulder and I staggered over. I didn't have enough time to regain my balance before the hands pushed against my shoulders again, ensuring that I fell over as I rebounded off of a wall behind me. A rough hand covered my mouth before I could cry out as my left arm was twisted around my back by a second hand, the movement shoving me against the ground.

"...idiot..." A different voice coughed, the speaker's throat sounding dry, "...not ripe enough..."

"...tainted enough for me..." The first voice whispered close to my ear, their breath dancing across my neck.

I struggled to get up, trying to bite the hand over my mouth but they had cupped it far enough where I couldn't clamp down. My left wrist was twisted a little further, prompting a scream from me as pain shot up my shoulder.

I couldn't understand what they were talking about...

ripe?

They were speaking as if I was food.

"Well, well, look at who's here," A familiar voice called out in a sing-song tone, "Here I was out for a good morning walk, and...(y/n)?!"

Todomatsu!?

The hand around my mouth tightened, preventing even my loudest muffles from escaping. A flash of pink light made me close my eyes, feeling the person holding me jump off before a more gentle hand touched my shoulder.

"(Y/n), what are you doing here?"

I looked up over my shoulder to see Todomatsu crouched next to me, his hand on my shoulder with a look of concern on his face. There was no one else behind him.

"I...What happened?"

"Hmm?" He looked in the same direction as me, turning back with a slight smile on his lips, "They're gone, if that's what you were asking about."

"Okay...?" He helped me up and brushed off my back as my hands dusted my front. I glanced around to verify his statement and realized that I had been pushed into some kind of alleyway next to the bakery, "What are you doing here, Father Todomatsu?"

"I was out on my morning walk, and I saw someone get shoved into the alley. I couldn't ignore someone in need, so I rushed over to help," He adjusted the chemisette over his shoulders before circling around me, giving me a look over before nodding in approval, "I'm glad that nothing serious happened."

"Me, too, but...where did they go?"

"A lot of criminals fear a man of God," I followed him out of the alley, watching as he gave a little nod towards me, "They probably vanished because they saw me."

"Why? Are you known for ambushing criminals with sermons?" I smiled a little.

"You could say that," His lips tightened into a curt smile before taking in a breath, "Despite it being windy, it's still a lovely morning. I'm going to--"

The pleased expression on his face shifted to slight annoyance as he looked past me, causing me to turn around and see Ichimatsu standing a few meters away. A face mask was pulled down to his chin, revealing the deep frown that he appeared to always have, but what caught my attention was the glare that my boss was sending me. It chilled me to the core, and I instinctively gave a deep bow from a fear of being reprimanded.

"I'm so sorry, sir! I'll finish up my cho--"

"That's enough," Ichimatsu cut me off, "I'm not hiring you."

"Wh...what...?" My mind raced with things I could've possibly messed up.

"Did I interrupt an interview, (y/n)?" Todomatsu softly asked from behind me.

"N-no...I--" I stood up and looked towards Todomatsu, fighting back tears before locking eyes with Ichimatsu, "What did I do wrong?"

Ichimatsu's eyes narrowed further as he started to walk towards me, his hand reaching out and swiping the directions from my soft grip as he passed by. I heard the bakery door chime as it opened, "The company you keep will drag you down."

"Hold on--" Todomatsu shifted to look at him before I clenched my fists and interrupted him.

"If the people that I knew from childhood are that bad, then why are they trying to help me stand back up?!" I don't know what came over me or why I was snarling at Ichimatsu as I turned to face him, "Who are you to cut me down for a silly reason like that? You know

nothing

about me, and I was genuinely excited about working at your café!"

The silence from the two men made the air hard to breathe.

"Thanks for giving me a 'trial run'. I won't bother you anymore," I walked away, my hands pushing the tears from my eyes.

Back to square one...

I'd have to apologize to Karamatsu for messing up my opportunity whenever I ran into him next.

Choice Poll Closed

Hrm...well.

No one responded within the week, so I guess I'll just continue with how I originally viewed the story.

Chapter 6

The morning sun poured through the sheer curtains hanging over the window next to the bed I was sleeping in, perfectly angled to shine into my eyes. Groaning a little, I sat up and looked towards the analog clock hanging over the room doorway, rolling my eyes to see that it was barely 8 a.m. An early start to a better day than yesterday...hopefully.

Ducking into the shower and dressing in my original clothes afterwards, I debated looking for work again, especially after the debacle yesterday morning.

I bit into an apple as my mind drifted to whatever had happened. There seemed to be some kind of tension between the two men that were supposed to be brothers.

'

The company you keep will drag you down.'

What did Ichimatsu really mean by that?

A soft pain disrupted my thoughts as I threw out the apple core, drawing my attention to my abdomen. I steeled my nerves and went towards Sister Totoko's office, knocking on the door jamb while waiting outside the closed door.

A soft conversation inside stopped when I knocked, a moment passing before I heard the door click open. Sister Totoko opened the door as she looked down at me, seemingly surprised to see me.

"(Y/n), what can I do for you?" The door swung open wide enough for me to see Osomatsu sitting in one of the guest chairs, his head partially turned towards the door with a look I didn't know what to call on his face.

"Oh, uh...I didn't mean to interrupt," I rubbed my right forearm with my left hand, "I was just hoping that I could get information about some kind of...health clinic...for pregnant women? Well, I want to take a test to see if...I'm pregnant or not," My voice grew softer with each word, as if ashamed by simply asking the question.

"Well, I can certainly see about procuring a pregnancy test for you," Sister Totoko looked back towards Father Osomatsu before turning back to me, "There is a clinic just down the road that is partnered with the church, if you'd like to go there instead."

"That's probably a good idea..." I look towards my feet, "Am I able to get directions there?"

"I don't mind walking you there, (y/n)," Osomatsu straightened up in his chair and turned towards me, "I was just about to head out on a walk through the city anyway."

"Could you please give me a moment to get ready? I'm not ready to head out right now," I quickly looked at him, a blush overcoming my cheeks as I shook my head.

"That's all right, just come back when you are.There are a few things that I need to finish up with Sister Totoko," He gave a soft smile in response.

I nodded and left, heading back up to my shared room and putting on my shoes while noticing the thinning soles and stretched fabric. I pursed my lips as I took a mental note to find donated shoes in my size, if the shelter even had any. Laying down on the bed in slight frustration, I closed my eyes as the reality of the situation sank in again.

////

Ichiro slammed the bedroom door behind him, instantly waking me up from my nap as I scrambled to figure out what was going on. The bedroom light flooded the room as his voice pierced my ears.

"I fucking knew it!" He ripped the blanket off of me, my phone clutched in his other hand, "I've dedicated three years to this relationship and you throw it away! Who is Tom?!"

"Wha--? Ichiro, what are you talking about?" I rubbed my eyes as I sat up.

"Who the fuck is Tom?!" He yelled again, stomping over to my side of the bed and stood over me with the fury of a thousand suns in his eyes.

"Tom? He's an old classmate that contacted me a few weeks ago," I groaned, wanting to go back to sleep before I worked my night shift in a few hours.

"Bullshit! You've been sleeping with him, haven't you?!" His rough fingers grasped at my shirt and threw me from the bed, fully waking me up as I hit the closet door.

"Ichiro! What the hell?!" I cried out as I scrambled away from the man who was quickly turning into a monster, "I'm not sleeping with anyone else!"

"You've been coming home with bruises, (y/n)!" He chased me through the bedroom door, his normally kind blue eyes hardened into an icy steel.

"Because of my job," I ran from the bedroom towards the kitchen, fully intent on giving him space to cool down, "You know that I bruise easily, and I'm clumsy as hell to boot!"

"Get out!"

"What--?" I stopped running, the words like a cold slap against my face.

"You heard me, whore. Get out of my apartment, and go fuck Tom!" He shoved my zippered hoodie in my face and roughly pointed towards the door. I barely caught the hoodie, but didn't move from my spot.

"

Your

apartment?! I pay half the rent! You can't just kick me out because you're tripping on your delusions!" I took a step towards him, anger replacing my confusion. Ichiro gritted his teeth and grabbed my wrist, dragging me towards the front door and shoving me through.

"I never should've fucked a whore," He spat out as he closed the door in my face, locking it tightly.

////

I took a deep breath as I opened my eyes, confused as to where I was before looking around my half of the room, reality registering that I was in the women's shelter. Rubbing my face, a glance at the clock told me that I had fallen asleep for almost an hour. It's not like I was--

Osomatsu was waiting for me!

I bolted off the bed and grabbed my zippered sweatshirt, tucking it under my arm as I quickly made my way towards Sister Totoko's office. The door was open with Osomatsu placing something down on Sister Totoko's desk as she sat in her chair.

"All ready to go?" Osomatsu turned his head towards me, hearing my labored breathing as I fought to regain my composure. He seemed to smirk a little before covering his mouth with a hand.

"...yeah...sorry for the wait."

"There wasn't much of one," He ushered me in front of him as he walked out, escorting me through the front lobby after I notified the receptionist of where I was headed. He held the door open for me, and I quickly put on the sweatshirt as the wind held a bit of chill.

"So," He cut through the silence as we walked, "Todomatsu told me about the little predicament he found you in yesterday with that café owner."

"Ah...that," I lowered my eyes to the sidewalk, "I don't know what it was about, but there's not much I can do about it."

My mind wandered back to what had happened yesterday morning. There was

no way

that I had imagined the tension between Ichimatsu and Todomatsu, not with the air they were giving off. Was the glare Ichimatsu gave me even directed at

me?

"Will you be looking for more jobs today?" I felt his hand brush against my arm, bringing my thoughts back to him.

"I'm not sure," I answered honestly, "It's been kind of disheartening this whole week...I can try to look for one a little bit later on, but I may want some time to emotionally recover."

"That's all right. Take whatever time you need."

I looked towards Osomatsu, taking a breath to ask a question before someone tapped my shoulder, drawing my focus behind me.

The smiling face of Karamatsu looked down at me, his hand raising up in a wave of 'hello' as I fully turned around. The morning sun caught his dark hair and blue tint, but the black instrument case in his other hand caught my attention. It looked like a brand new guitar case, the latches shining silver in the sunlight.

"Good morning, (y/n)," He gave a light laugh as I heard Osomatsu stop behind me.

"Karamatsu, morning," A smile filled my face before I remembered about yesterday, my head starting to drop in shame, "I...I owe you an apology."

"An apology? For what?" He tucked a curled finger underneath my chin, lifting my head up to see his face, "If it's in regards to the tantrum that Ichimatsu had yesterday morning, there's no need to apologize."

"But I ruined my chance after you suggested that I go there--"

"(Y/n), care to introduce me to your friend here?" Osomatsu's voice called out behind me. My eyes widened and I looked back towards him, a kind smile present on his lips.

"I'm so sorry! Karamatsu, this is Father Osomatsu," I moved a hand to present Osomatsu to Karamatsu.

"I know who he is," Karamatsu seemed to stand taller, looking at the man on the other side of me, "Good morning to you, Osomatsu."

"And to you, Karamatsu," The tone Osomatsu used sounded cold, "How is daddy dearest doing these days?"

"We left quite a few years ago, but he's still around. Misses the three of you quite a bit," Karamatsu's voice seemed to echo the coldness, "(Y/n) informed me that you're a man of the cloth now."

"That I am," Osomatsu took a breath in, his chest swelling as if wanting to show off his clothes, "I am an Archdeacon, while our younger brothers hold the title of Dean."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Karamatsu interjected, "For someone so high up in the chain, I'm a little surprised to see that you have time to walk the streets."

The air between the brothers suddenly stilled, the temperature dropping rapidly. I gripped my sweatshirt sleeves tightly, my breath visible in the chill air as confusion ran through my head. Ichimatsu and Todomatsu had reacted in nearly the same way when they had made eye contact.

What was going on, and what had happened between the brothers?

"Umm..." I tried to stop my teeth from chattering, slightly flinching as both brothers looked down at me with an intense stare, "I'm not really dressed for winter weather...and the temperature dropped, so I'm just...going to head on to the clinic...?"

"Clinic?" Karamatsu raised an eyebrow as the tension left his eyes, "Are you sick?"

"Ah, no...I just want to make sure that..." My voice dropped in volume, "...that I'm not pregnant."

"I'll escort you there," He started to offer before Osomatsu waved his hand dismissively.

"The clinic is on my daily walking route, so I was going to take her. You seem...busy."

"I was just delivering to one of my customers," Karamatsu narrowed his eyes towards Osomatsu, "If it's the clinic that I think you're suggesting, there's a better one near my client."

"No, it's okay...!" I interrupted, "This one is close to the shelter I'm at, and I don't mind Father Osomatsu escorting me there."

Karamatsu lowered his gaze back down to me, seemingly searching for something before a soft look settled in his face, "If that's what you want, then go ahead. Take care, (y/n) and Osomatsu."

He gave a parting wave before crossing the street and vanishing into the morning crowds. I stayed until I couldn't see him anymore, turning to Osomatsu with a prying look.

"What was that all about?"

"Excuse me?" The question seemed to catch him off guard.

"The tension between you two," I clarified, "It happened with Ichimatsu and Todomatsu, too. What happened to you guys?"

He raised a hand to scratch the back of his head as a thoughtful look crossed his face. His dark hair held a slight tint of red that caught the sunlight, almost distracting me from the movement of Osomatsu's face shifting from the thoughtful look to glancing at me out of the sides of his eyes. I caught his glance and held it.

"It's a long story."

"I'm homeless and have nowhere to really be, Archdeacon Osomatsu," I threw the title back at him, narrowing my eyes a little.

"I'll tell you after your visit, okay?" He looked back across the street, as if observing something that I couldn't see.

"...fine," I relented, "But I'm holding you to that."

I motioned for him to lead on towards the clinic, following him and unable to shake the feeling of being watched from somewhere.

Chapter 7

My unease grew as the doctor closed the door behind him, his face wearing an unreadable expression. I tightened my fists in anticipation as he sat in his chair, keeping my mind calm as he took in a breath.

"The results from the test were inconclusive," He finally made eye contact with me, "It may be too early to tell, or you may not be pregnant at all. Give it another week and come back to be retested."

"Are...you sure?" I resisted rubbing my stomach, "I felt a slight pain earlier today, so I was a little worried."

"It's possible that your cycle will be starting soon, so that may be the cause," The doctor folded his hands together, "We have some pamphlets if you're interested in taking them about what to expect when you're expecting."

"I...uh, I'll pass," I stood up quickly, not feeling comfortable in the office, "I'll take another test next week, I guess."

"Very well, then," He stood up and opened the door for me, "It was nice to meet you, (y/n)."

"Same to you."

I quickly made my way out of the clinic, refusing to stop by the receptionist's desk to schedule another appointment. Speed-walking down the sidewalk, I ignored my surroundings and went as far as I could from the clinic. I've had a bad feeling about it ever since I took a step inside.

It wasn't something that I could put my finger on for exactly why it bothered me, but it always felt like I was being watched -- the same kind of feeling that the two men in the alley had made me feel, like I was some kind of food or prey. I shook my head hard, not wanting my imagination to run wild with suspicions. The clinic's personnel were kind enough, but I

couldn't help but feel like they were acting that way because Osomatsu had walked in with me.

I stopped hard on my tracks.

I left Osomatsu behind!

Spinning around, I looked behind to see a familiar outline of a man, his figure slightly slouched over. His eyes slightly closed as we made eye contact.

"Ichimatsu...?"

"...you've been ignoring me since you left that building," He didn't move towards me, his hands tucked in his pockets.

"Have I...? I'm sorry," I lowered my head, "Just...have a lot on my mind--"

"You start tomorrow at 5 a.m., so don't be late," He turned on his heel and began to walk away.

"Wait...what?" I took a step forward to follow him, stopping when he looked over his shoulder at me.

"Hmm?"

"What do you mean 'I start tomorrow'? Last I checked, you were furious with me!"

"...was I?" He looked upwards, as if searching for an answer before lowering his gaze at me, "No, not at you."

"You said that you weren't hiring me," Another step forward brought me within arms reach of his back.

"...I may have said that," Ichimatsu's eyes watched my every move, his body not budging an inch.

"Then why the change of heart?" I stepped around to face him fully. His slouched position brought his head almost down to my level, and his dark eyes were intense as they locked onto my new position. They closed in a slow blink, as if he was thinking of what to say next.

"...one more chance," His gruff voice softly commented, "I was told to give you one more chance."

"Told...?" My mind reflected on what Karamatsu did only a few hours earlier, of how his face was soft in understanding as he made me look up at him, "Did...Karamatsu--?"

"Like I said, you start tomorrow at 5 a.m.," He stepped around me and kept walking. I watched as his back disappeared into the crowd, staying there for a moment longer before making my way towards the shelter.

I informed the receptionist of the schedule change (again), and walked towards the donation area, looking into the large storage box that held the pants that were donated to the shelter. A slight frown started to form on my face when I couldn't find any more pants that were my size, most of the donations were for preteens and children. Quietly putting the container back into place, I headed towards my room and lay on the bed. My mind buzzed with questions about the brothers, or rather, their whole family.

In twenty years, the three boys that I had known as cheerful, playful, and mischievous had grown into men in their own right -- strong, kind, and seemingly caring...but something still didn't sit right with me. There was something hidden behind their smiles, and I couldn't place my finger on it. The memory of Osomatsu's eyes flashed in my head, the dark look that he had given me a few days ago was

definitely

not from the Osomatsu I knew from childhood.

Maybe I'd have some luck asking Ichimatsu about it tomorrow.

"--/n)?" The sound of my name cut through my thoughts.

"Yeah...?" I sat up to see the head of my roommate poking around the dividing wall between our beds. Her bright red hair moved slightly as she took a breath.

"There's a guest for you downstairs."

"I thought no visitors were allowed?" I raised an eyebrow while sliding off the bed.

"We're not supposed to bring people in, but people can ask to see us," She ducked around the corner as I walked towards the door, tucking herself into her own bed. I gave a last glance before shutting the door behind me. There wasn't much I knew about my roommate, outside that she worked a night job and was kicked out by her landlord. She looked to be about my age, but I never pressed for info.

Picking at my shirt and pants, I tried to make myself look presentable for whoever was asking for me as I moved towards the lobby. The hair color of the man in the lobby made me stop in my tracks, the familiar auburn dye color looking freshly applied as the man looked around at the artwork in the lobby.

Ichiro...!

Chapter 8

Seven days ago, I would've fought with the man currently leaning into his car -- Ichiro, the man that locked me out of his life after a three-year relationship. He had come to drop off my things, since he needed room for his

new

girlfriend's stuff.

It made me partially suspicious that he accused me of cheating to cover up his own tracks...but it wasn't my business anymore. I wasn't going to crawl back to Ichiro for a relationship. Not after the false accusations he seemed so proud of.

There were two cardboard boxes taped up and sealed with my name scrawled on the flaps, and he stacked them in front of me as I watched from a distance.

"I packed up what I could remember were yours, but this is everything," He smiled as he patted the top box. I folded my arms in front of my chest and continued to give him a hard look, "You didn't have much to begin with, so it made packing easy."

"Uh-huh...Is my phone packed away?"

"No, I returned it to the store when I cancelled your line," Ichiro shrugged dismissively, as if he did me a favor.

"Any of my bathroom things?" I raised an eyebrow, my thin veil of patience quickly vanishing.

"Yeah, they're in there. Your feminine products, too," He motioned towards the boxes before looking up behind me, "I'm glad you found somewhere to stay, despite it looking like an old school."

"It

is

an old school, converted to help those less fortunate and giving them a place to stay and recover," Sharp footsteps announced someone's presence as a voice came closer, drawing my attention to the green-accented cassock of Choromatsu.

"Father Choromatsu," My body loosened up as the tension from before seemed to vanish, "Good afternoon."

"Good afternoon, (y/n). Is this a friend of yours?" His hooded eyes swept over Ichiro, the half-rimmed glasses perched high on his nose.

"Oh, uh...this is my ex-boyfriend, Ichiro. He was just delivering some of my things that were left behind in

his

apartment," I waved a hand towards Ichiro, who seemed to stand a little straighter and glare at Choromatsu.

"Thank you for helping out (y/n) in her time of need," Choromatsu gave a soft smile as he closed his eyes fully, a hand over his heart as he slightly bowed in Ichiro's direction. The gesture seemed to throw him off, "May God look over you kindly."

"Ah...it's no problem," Ichiro took a step back and jabbed a thumb towards his car, "I...I need to leave."

I could only watch in confusion as Ichiro climbed into the driver's seat and pulled into the busy street, forcing his way between cars to leave the shelter's parking lot. A soft grunt turned my attention back to Choromatsu, his gloved hands easily hefting up the top cardboard box as he looked down at me, as if waiting for further instructions.

"No, you don't have to, Fath--!"

"It's all right, (y/n)," He cut me off as I scrambled to grab the last box, lifting the light load and quickly walking towards the shelter lobby, "I've been meaning to ask you something."

"What is it?" I turned towards him, confusion prominent on my face.

"Is there anything that you need for immediate use? Such as a cell phone or clothes, or any other item?" Choromatsu continued, meeting and holding my gaze as we stood still, "But more importantly, would you want a place of your own?"

The wind grew harsh for a moment, tossing about our hair and his stole before settling back down. I couldn't help but stare at him for a bit.

"I...do have hopes to save up enough money for a small apartment near the area, but I haven't really started working yet," Something rubbed me the wrong way about what Choromatsu was asking. He was a Dean within the church, so was it okay for him to carry on the conversation like this? It sounded...wrong.

"If you already have an idea of how you'll stand back up, then I won't pry any further," He walked past me and up the stairway to the shelter, "The only thing that we ask for is that you let us know if there's anything we can do to help. Even if it seems mundane."

"Why...?" The question slipped between my lips before I realized what I said, "Why are you guys doing this?"

"'Why'?" Choromatsu turned around, his eyes fully open for the first time since I saw him in church a few nights ago, "You're like a little sister to us, and we believe this is our chance to be there for you...when no one else can stand next to you."

I folded the last pair of jeans on my bed, the denim still warm from the dryer, my hands running over the rough surface as my thoughts drifted back to seeing Choromatsu earlier. I couldn't help but feel like a giant puzzle was

set up in front of me, but the pieces were so small that I couldn't even make out where they went.

Why am I having so much doubt about the men that seem to really care for me and what I'm going through?

Putting the folded pants onto a shelf lined with my freshly cleaned old clothes, I lay back down on the bed and looked out the window, the sunset reminding me that I had a job to go to tomorrow morning. Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and lay on my side, feeling strangely exhausted after the easy day that I had.

///

"For someone blessed by Him, you sure are cruel to everyone around you," A man dressed in priest garb sighed towards another male figure. The second male was slightly hunched over as they both quietly watched a female form run off down the sidewalk, the priest resting a hand on his hip before a smirk overcame the frown on his face.

"You're one to talk," The other man huffed as he stepped inside a building nearby, tilting his head slightly to keep an eye on the priest as the door closed on his figure. Wrapping his arms around something bulky, the slouched man's eyes narrowed when he realized the priest hadn't left the spot outside the building as he exited. He clicked his tongue and turned away, intent on getting back somewhere quickly.

"You could give her another chance, big brother," The priest walked in step with the slouched man, although quite a distance behind him.

"Not when she's affiliated with any of you, *****."

A name was spoken, but it was garbled.

"She's not

with

any of us," The priest hummed with a finger resting on his cheek.

"Don't lie to me...the scent of your kind was all over her."

"True, but that wasn't

us

. There were some others that tried to eat her, and I just happened to be there."

The slouched man cast a glare over his shoulder, staring down the priest who merely deflected the accusatory look with a small smile.

"Then what do you want from her? She's innocent in all of this."

The priest stopped walking, his face hidden from view as he looked towards the ground. The other man suddenly flinched away and fully faced him as pressure began to emanate from the priest, interrupting the wind and shifting the gales around both men. As he looked back up at him, the priest's eyes had a red glow that danced across his irises. The slouched man shifted his posture and stood up to his full height, his own eyes paling to a light lavender color, gritting his teeth as he felt a sudden aura of bloodlust burst out from the red-eyed priest, partially revealing the monster hiding behind the smiling face.

"(Y/n) is an important piece to us. We won't touch her...yet."

///

I sat up, startled from whatever was playing in my head and drenched in sweat. The faces of the men were fading fast, but I could still remember their clothes: a cassock lined with salmon-pink, and a purple jacket that rested over sweatpants.

Todomatsu and Ichimatsu.

What was going on?

Chapter 9

"I've finished the morning assignments, Ichimatsu," I called out from the kitchen as I plated the last few bits of bakery goods, storing them under a cover to keep the moisture in. I flipped through the instructional folder to ensure that I did everything he had needed me to do before 7 a.m., going through a mental checklist and allowing myself a smile when I was satisfied that I had completed everything.

A soft thumping noise sounded from the staircase before the door opened, Ichimatsu stepping into the kitchen quietly while dressed in semi-formal attire. His hair was partially combed back and tucked behind his ears, exposing his neck that was wrapped up nicely in a purple collared shirt. He looked...stunning.

"When the cats finish their food, gather and clean their dishes. The café will be opening in a few minutes," His eyes glanced around the kitchen before he left, his footsteps retreating towards the front. I nodded silently and went to check on Sophie's progress, slightly opening the door to see that she had eaten all of her food and opening the door wider so she could leave the room.

"Oh, you're back," A familiar voice caught my ears, "Need any help?"

I looked behind me and saw the same waiter from when I was looking for work, his coat hanging over his left arm as he waved towards me.

"Ah...yeah," I nodded, "Just trying to keep out of the way, since I don't really know what my job title is."

"That's odd, but we do need the assistance," He hung up his coat in the closet by the kitchen, moving towards the tablet by the front door, "My name is Takeda Juurou, by the way."

"(L/n) (y/n). It's nice to meet your acquaintance," I slightly bowed.

"The pleasure is all mine," He returned the bow before logging into whatever program the store used to track orders. Ichimatsu returned from the front door, tugging slightly at the collar of his shirt before motioning from me towards the kitchen. He followed closely behind and pulled out the plates from their containers.

"Is there anything I need to do?" I moved out of his way, watching him carefully.

"You said that you'd do anything, right?"

"Y-yeah...?"

"If you see us bogged down, help where you can," His dark eyes met mine, "Friday is our busiest day."

The clock finally ticked past 6 p.m., and Ichimatsu locked the door behind the last customer. Takeda gave out a long sigh before opening the tip jar and tallying up every yen, adding it to something else before handing Ichimatsu the paperwork.

I was completely

exhausted

.

Even my previous job as a factory line worker wasn't this intensive. Taking a deep breath, I focused on cleaning up the dining area and washing the dishes. Ichimatsu seemed to have the pattern of each day down to the second -- opening before people went into work, letting the cats rest between the lunch break and the work rush after a majority of shifts ended, and closing the café just before the dinner rush was at its peak.

I scraped every last piece of food off the plates before dumping them into the soapy water, rolling up my proverbial sleeves and scrubbing each one clean before setting it into the sanitized water basin. I had been running

around nonstop through the time the café was open, running food back and forth from the kitchen, fetching Ichimatsu for adoption inquiries, helping Takeda out in the front--

"You did a lot better than I thought you would've," Takeda laughed as he entered the kitchen, his hands full of the cat dishes that I had left behind for a second run.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I breathed out, wiping my sweaty brow on my inner elbow as I focused on the dishes.

"Do you have any plans after this?"

The question stopped anything that I was thinking about.

"Excuse me...?" I partially turned to look at him, his back towards me as he reached for towels to dry the dishes with.

"Not like a date, but just to hang out...?"

"I can't stay out for much longer. I need to get..." I bit down on my tongue. Should I tell him about me being homeless? Sure, I don't look like the stereotypical homeless person, but...

did he need to know?

"That's okay. I kinda figured that you'd turn it down with such a short notice," He turned around with a smile, walking to the basin next to me and taking out the dishes that were soaking in the sanitization fluid.

"Maybe tomorrow," I tried to laugh past my nervousness.

"We're closed tomorrow. The café is closed on every weekend," Takeda stated matter-of-factly, organizing the dried dishes into neat piles.

"Right," I put the last dish in the sink and scrubbed it clean as Ichimatsu called for Takeda. With him gone, the tension in my body left. I don't think he meant for it to sound like an actual date, but I had never been good at the 'get-to-know-you' kind of thing.

With the last dish soaking, I turned my attention towards the garbage bins and started to gather them all up by the back door. Grabbing the bags in both hands, I shoved the back door open and made my way towards the dumpster. After opening the dumpster lid and throwing the garbage bags in, I wiped my hands off on my shirt, my hands running over my stomach.

"Please...don't be a baby..." I whispered quietly to myself. The same soft pain from before pulsed in my stomach, quickly turning into a sharp, stabbing sensation that drove the wind out of my lungs as I cried out in agony.

What the...?!

The pain seemed to crash over me again and again, each wave somehow more painful than the last. I couldn't remember when I last felt this kind of pain, falling to my knees and clutching my arms around my stomach. A tangy taste was starting to build up in my mouth, as if I had licked something sour and metallic, and I clamped a hand over my mouth. The semi-familiar sensation of vomiting began to itch at the back of my throat.

I could vaguely hear someone talking, but couldn't make out any of the words. I felt arms lift me from my kneeling position before my body finally convulsed and I retched in front of me, coughing and crying out in pain. There was another voice replying to the first, the volume growing before I couldn't hear anything at all.

Ichimatsu held (y/n)'s shoulders as her head hung over his arm, his glare directed at a figure blocking the alley entrance. The smile on the figure cut through their shadowed appearance, their attention focused on (y/n).

"Why..." Ichimatsu's tone held no question, "You didn't have to do it."

"She said she didn't want the baby," The figure's smile grew wider, "So I took the child away from her, and gave him to a woman who deserved him more."

"You can't do that...! You know they'll find out," Ichimatsu barely shifted (y/n) into a more comfortable position in his arms.

"If they do, then they can ask for my reasons," The shadowed figure shrugged before turning away from the alley, "But their reactions are not my concern."

"Wait...!" Ichimatsu tried to run after the figure, but the weight in his arms brought his attention back to (y/n), who looked ragged. He clicked his tongue before looking back up to the entrance of the alley, his eyes narrowing in frustration as the figure was no longer there.

Chapter 10

A pounding on his back door stirred Karamatsu from his tuning, confusion crossing over his face for a moment as he set the guitar down on the couch. The familiar aura from the other side of the door immediately alerted him of the guest and Karamatsu opened the door without delay, the door swinging inward to reveal a breathless and slightly panicked Ichimatsu awkwardly carrying an unconscious (y/n).

"Ich--"

"Here," Ichimatsu practically shoved (y/n) into Karamatsu's arms, his face tense, "You deal with this."

"Wha--Ichimatsu, what's going on?" Karamatsu quickly held (y/n), taking in her deteriorating condition with a glance, "What happened..."

Ichimatsu didn't step into the house, looking away as his eyes narrowed further, "...he made his move."

Karamatsu took in a slow breath, a look of recognition passing over his face before directing his attention back to the woman in his arms. His face set in determination as he walked her towards the couch, moving his guitar out of the way before laying her down. Rubbing his hands together, Karamatsu spread his fingers wide and hovered them over (y/n)'s body, moving downwards from her face before pausing over her stomach.

The silence grew between the brothers, the air becoming heavy with anticipation before Karamatsu turned towards Ichimatsu.

"Why not bring her to a hospital? I thought you hated me."

"...I hate hospitals more..." The purple-clad brother grunted, not meeting Karamatsu's gaze.

"Did you see it happen?"

"No...I didn't," Ichimatsu closed his eyes.

"Do they know?"

"...it's possible by now."

Karamatsu stood up from his kneeling position, rubbing a hand on his face before sighing.

"I'll take care of her for the night, and try to soothe things over with the shelter in the morning."

Ichimatsu stayed silent for a short while before nodding and closing the back door, leaving Karamatsu alone with (y/n).

The damage to her womb was extensive, and (y/n) was mercifully unconscious through the entire process as Karamatsu began to heal what he could. It wasn't one of his strongest gifts, but he knew that a hospital would only ask questions from him in regards to her condition and how her uterus became as shredded as it was. His brow furrowed as sweat began to bead on his forehead, the energy slowly passing from his hands to her body, making the internal organ stitch itself up. He wasn't able to completely heal the damage done, but she wasn't going to bleed out.

The sunlight slowly crept into the backroom, peeking in through the partially shaded window and casting the faint morning light down on (y/n)'s feet. Karamatsu swallowed hard as he finally pulled away from her, tugging up his shirt to wipe away the sweat. His mind worked through the next steps that he'd have to do: call the shelter to alert them to where she was, possibly deal with one of the staff visiting...or one of his brothers. How was he going to explain that one of his own acted independently?

He looked back at (y/n), her face now fully relaxed as she slept.

She needed to be cared for first.

Karamatsu stood up and stretched, moving towards his bedroom a few doors down and pulling out a tank top, a pullover hoodie, and a pair of

sweatpants from his closet and setting them inside the guest bathroom by the back room. Heading towards his office near the front of the house, he grabbed the landline phone and dialed the shelter's main number, walking towards the back room when the line clicked over.

"St. Benedict Joseph Labre House of Hope, Sister Yui speaking."

"Ah, yes...I have one of your tenants here. She failed to check in last night due to a medical emergency after her work shift, and she's still asleep," Karamatsu spoke in a calm manner, "Her name is (l/n) (y/n)."

"Hold one moment, please," The line switched to a call hold, giving Karamatsu a moment to breathe. The hold music played for a few minutes before the receptionist picked the line back up.

"Is Ms. (y/n) still with you?"

"Yes, she hasn't moved since she fell asleep here," He looked over at (y/n).

"We appreciate you taking care of one of our own. Be sure to have her bring the medical documents with her upon her return so we can put them under her file."

"All right," Karamatsu rubbed his forehead with his thumb and index finger.

Of course they'd ask for official papers...

"Thank you, sir, and have a blessed day," The line clicked dead as Karamatsu moved the handset away from his ear. One of his brothers was on their way; that was the only reason why the shelter wasn't worried about

when

(y/n) would be back.

A yawn drew Karamatsu's attention to the couch, seeing (y/n) slowly stretch out and sit up, her hand quickly darting to her stomach as she winced.

"Good morning, (y/n)," He softly called out, standing far away from her as she started to wake up.

"...Kara...matsu...?" After rubbing her eyes, she looked around the back room, taking in the change of scenery.

"How are you feeling?" Karamatsu didn't move from his position.

"I feel sore...though, I'm more confused as to why I'm...here...?" She moved into a more comfortable sitting position, slowly swinging her legs over the edge of the couch and looking around the room more closely.

"Ichimatsu brought you to my house last night after finding you in the back alley next to his café," He set the handset down on a shelf in the nearby bookcase, "He didn't tell me any details."

She didn't respond as her face screwed up in thought, and Karamatsu waited patiently for the questions to come.

"I...remember taking the trash out after the café closed..." Her hand brushed over her lips, pulling away and rubbing her fingertips together as if feeling something on them, "That's right...I was taking out the trash and felt this intense pain in my stomach. After that, it just got worse and I think I threw up...?"

"If you're worried, we can go to the clinic nearby to have you checked out. They open up in ten minutes," Karamatsu pointed towards the guest bathroom, "There's a spare set of clothes in there, so you're more than welcome to take a shower to freshen up beforehand."

"Okay..." She didn't sound sure but went to where he had pointed, closing and locking the door behind her. When the sound of running water filled the bathroom, Karamatsu put the handset back onto the dock in his office and changed into more public-appropriate clothing, exchanging his lounging outfit for a long-sleeved shirt, a pair of blue jeans, and his old leather jacket.

Fifteen minutes had passed when he heard the water in the guest bathroom shut off, his focus shifting back to his guitar as (y/n) went through whatever

her routine was. Karamatsu didn't want to rush her, despite knowing that with each minute that passed, whoever was sent to check up on her was coming closer. There wouldn't be a fight between the brothers -- not with (y/n) around -- but he still didn't want to risk her getting involved any more than she already was.

"Karamatsu, I'm good to go," The bathroom door opened down the hall, and she held her dirty clothes in a tightly-wadded ball. Karamatsu picked up the cue and put his guitar back in its case, moving towards the kitchen to grab a plastic grocery bag for her to put them in.

"There's a small walk-in clinic a few blocks down from here. I go there often, so I know they're good people," He handed her the bag and noticed the shift on her face, watching as uncertainty grew, "It's all right...you can trust them."

"I...I'll see for myself. The last one I went to didn't..." She trailed off, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"The one Osomatsu took you to?" He waved (y/n) through the front door. She barely nodded. Karamatsu withheld any outward reaction.

"I'm sorry to hear that..."

"It's not your fault," (Y/n) tried to laugh, "You were talking about another clinic for me to go to. Is this the same one?"

"Yeah. I go there for physical check-ups," Karamatsu gave her a wide smile as they walked.

"Just like you go to that café so often?" She glanced up at him, a slight smile on her lips.

"You can't deny that their food is good."

Karamatsu watched as the nurse called (y/n) in for a physical exam, staying in the outpatient waiting area until she disappeared behind the large

automated door, finally turning his attention to the man that had been staring at him for the past two minutes.

In the main entrance lobby stood Choromatsu, fully dressed in his green-lined cassock and light gray stole, a black briefcase held tightly in his left hand. His intense dark eyes stared at Karamatsu over the frames of his glasses, the glare alone issuing a challenge to the older brother. Karamatsu turned on his heel and walked out of the waiting area, taking long strides to stand in front of his younger brother, matching the glare with the same intensity.

"I'm here to pick up (y/n)."

"She's seeing a doctor at the moment."

"Then you're free to leave," Choromatsu narrowed his eyes, "I can handle the rest."

"You know that I can't do that," Karamatsu lifted his head up a little, staring down at the priest, "Last I checked,

you weren't exactly welcome here

."

Choromatsu's eyes flared red before he closed them, taking in a breath and letting it out slowly. Karamatsu stayed calm as he watched the priest restrain himself, knowing full well that he had the upper hand here.

"When did you become so protective of (y/n)?" Choromatsu opened his eyes again, a partial smile crossing his lips, "I didn't realize that you had become attracted to her."

"I'm not," Karamatsu's answer was quick and clear, "Don't test me again. You

will

lose. Go back to that 'church' of yours, and I'll deliver (y/n) there safely after she's finished."

Choromatsu huffed, tilting his head up a little before raising his right hand to push the glasses against his face.

"We'll see what she wants."

"Ms. (L/n), I have your results ready," The doctor stated as she took her seat on the stool nearby, the metal clipboard tucked under her arm as she logged into the small computer on the counter.

"So, what's the news...?" I tried to look at the screen, both not wanting to know and curious to find out what had caused the pain last night.

"The good news is that you're not pregnant," The doctor turned the screen fully towards me, showing the ultrasound still shots, "We did a complete scan of the area and found that your endometrium does have some scarring, as well as some old scarring on your right ovary. It could have been an ovarian cyst at one point, and the endometrium scarring will heal with time. I can prescribe some painkillers for you, but the over-the-counter pills will work just as well," She used a pen to point out what she was looking at, sounding confident in her analysis.

"I'll just get some over-the-counter stuff," She nodded when I uttered the words.

"All right. If you ever feel that intense pain again, come back and we'll take another look to see if that cyst is reoccurring," She logged off the computer and stood up, "Do you have any questions for me?"

"From the scan that was done...could you tell if I was ever pregnant at all?"

"The scarring on your endometrium is light, but there was no egg attached to the wall nor in the process of attaching to the wall. There was no chance

that a fetus was growing," The doctor shook her head, "I'm sorry if that's not the answer you wanted."

"No...it's just I've been having abdominal pain for the past few days. I just didn't know if it was pregnancy or just my body being mean."

"I can say for certain that it wasn't pregnancy. If the cramping becomes unbearable, you're welcome to speak with the OB/GYN about birth control options to help stabilize your cycle," The doctor smiled down at me. I smiled back in response, saying my goodbye as she left when I indicated there were no more questions. The nurse that led me in gave me some paperwork about the indicators of having ovarian cysts and what to do when there was a flare-up, leading me back out into the waiting area afterwards.

The entire visit had been pleasant, quite the stark difference from the clinic that Osomatsu had taken me to. The nurses were nice and caring, and the doctor had taken her time listening to the problems and symptoms that I was experiencing. If I had any future pain, I'd definitely take the extra walking time to come back here.

I had expected to see Karamatsu waiting there, but found his absence strange. As I moved from the waiting area to the main lobby, I saw Karamatsu standing stiffly while staring out the front door. Following his line of sight, I noticed Choromatsu sitting outside on one of the benches, thumbing through a small book while the wind gently tossed about his hair.

There was

definitely

something going on between the brothers...

"Karamatsu...?" I quietly drew his attention.

"(Y/n), you're finished?" The tense look on his face was replaced with slight surprise.

"Yeah, much faster than I anticipated..."

"That's good, then," Karamatsu gave a soft smile before looking back outside, "My brother, Choromatsu, is here to escort you back to the shelter. I had called them earlier to notify them of where you were, as I didn't want you to get into trouble with them. I don't mind walking you there, but it's up to you."

My grip on the papers tightened a little, considering my options.

If I walked with Karamatsu, then I could ask him more questions about what was going on between the brothers. It didn't seem like he had lied to me about anything so far, and Karamatsu appeared to be more open with questions than Choromatsu had been recently.

If I walked with Choromatsu, who knows if I'd get any kind of answer to the questions I had. A small feeling in the back of my head led me to believe that Choromatsu would be more open than Osomatsu or Todomatsu, in regards to their behavior...

Taking a few breaths to calm down, I looked back up at Karamatsu and gave him an answer.

"I--"

Choice Poll Closed!

You guys want to be walked back to the homeless shelter by Karamatsu!

I'll be releasing the new chapter at the normal time today.

Chapter 11

"I want you to walk me back, Karamatsu."

"I would be happy to escort you there," Karamatsu nodded with a slight smile. His arm swept towards the entrance, and I gave a small smile before walking in front of him. When the main automatic doors opened, I noticed Choromatsu glance up before closing his book and standing to his full height.

"(Y/n), how was the visit?" His eyes looked directly into mine, the glasses pushed up high on the bridge of his nose.

"It went well. I just need to go to the shelter to inform them of where I've been," I waved the papers a little bit, "I didn't want to take up any of your valuable time, so I've asked Karamatsu to walk me back."

He only blinked once before a soft smile turned his lips upward.

"If that's what you want, then I won't force it. I'm relieved to hear that there was no bad news for you," Choromatsu's left arm readjusted, the briefcase in his hand shifting slightly as his right hand tucked the book he was reading under his arm before moving upward to push his hair out of his face, "Will I be seeing you at Sunday Mass tomorrow?"

"At the church?" I raised an eyebrow, watching the green-clad priest nod in confirmation, "I don't work, so of course I'll be going."

"Wonderful. We'll see you then," Choromatsu bowed before walking towards the city, leaving Karamatsu and I alone.

"Shall we?" Karamatsu didn't touch me but I felt a tug on my heart, as if something was gently beckoning me to follow him.

"Hey, Karamatsu...do you mind if I ask you some questions?" I turned away from where Choromatsu had gone, looking up at the smiling man wearing a

leather jacket.

"That depends on the questions. I don't have the answer to the meaning of life," He laughed lightly before glancing down at me, slowing his walking speed.

"No...nothing like that," I took a breath, "I've noticed a lot of tension between the halves of your family. Like...

a lot

of tension. Did something happen?"

Karamatsu didn't flinch or show any change of expression, but the air around him seemed to still. As if nature was holding its breath for his answer.

"That's quite a personal question, (y/n)," He ran a hand through his hair before standing still, looking up to the clear sky for a moment, "We had...an incident happen years ago, and each set blames the other for what resulted from it. So much so that you could barely call us a 'family' anymore."

I felt like I stepped on a landmine. I didn't think that it was a deep-rooted problem for the brothers, just something that they'd have a disagreement about and then get over after they talked it through.

"Oh...I'm sorry," I lowered my head, "I just thought that it was something else, like jealousy or anger at what happened with your parents."

"In regards to the divorce?" I felt Karamatsu's finger curl under my chin, lifting my face gently, "No, we all understood why that happened. This is little more than a family feud, and nothing that you should worry over."

"It's just..." I started, mentally tripping over what I wanted to say. Karamatsu's facial expression didn't change, as if he was letting me think things through.

There was such animosity between Ichimatsu and Todomatsu, between Karamatsu and Choromatsu...I hadn't met the last brother, but I could safely

guess that it was the same between him and possibly Osomatsu. The only thing that I could see in common between all three pairs was...

"Is it because they're priests? That they're part of a religion?"

"It has nothing to do with their rank in the clergy, I promise. None of us are jealous of them in that regard," Karamatsu released my chin, a wide smile on his lips.

I caught the verbal slip-up.

"You said 'jealous in that regard'. What are you jealous of?"

"That I can't tell you, but let me reassure you that it's not jealousy we feel towards them. Live your life, and move on from here when you're able to stand on your own two feet," For a brief moment, I witnessed Karamatsu change. His normally bluish-dark hair had paled as if heavily bleached by the sun, and his dark eyes grew milky with a faint blue tint. The only thing I could see behind him was white, as if we were standing in the middle of the sun. The image faded as quickly as it came, and my head throbbed harshly with a sudden headache...just like the first time I had really looked at Karamatsu.

"Let's get you back to the shelter," He turned away as if nothing had happened, leaving me to quietly follow him.

The rest of the walk was silent, but I had more answers than when I started. After checking in with the receptionist and dropping off the doctor's paperwork, I went to the cathedral and found the church library. The only thing that came into my head about the relationship between the brothers was a war, and the only war that I knew of attached to the church was the one between angels and demons.

Pouring through encyclopedias and references throughout the Bible of appearances of angels and demons, I couldn't find the exact example of

what I was looking for. I had borrowed a notepad that I found on someone's desk, along with a pen, and scribbled down my thoughts for who was what.

It made sense that Osomatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu were angels due to the fact that they worked in a church, but then what did that mean for the other three? Were they demons?

Karamatsu was rather nice-looking and Ichimatsu wasn't that bad on the eyes...but then again, Lucifer was supposedly the most beautiful angel in Heaven before he fell.

I shook my head, thinking back to the fragments of the dream that I'd had. The scene of a man like Todomatsu and another like Ichimatsu. They were upset at something, and they were about to fight. My brain couldn't keep the details straight, and I shook my head to try and clear my thoughts.

I'd have my answer tomorrow during Mass. Since Osomatsu seemed to preach from the Bible every weekend and wasn't driven away by the Word, then I should know for a fact that he wasn't a demon...right?

"You're digging into some pretty heavy stuff there," A quiet voice pulled me from my racing thoughts, the speaker's breath brushing against my right ear. I looked over my shoulder to see Osomatsu partially leaning over me, his eyes scanning everything that was in front of me.

"Ah...yeah..." I chuckled nervously before closing many of the books, flipping the notepad over so he couldn't see his brothers' names written on it, "Just had an idea in my head, and wanted to cross-check it to see if I remembered it correctly."

"About the 'War in Heaven'?" He tilted his head slightly and raised an eyebrow in question.

"Well, kinda?" I shrugged before returning some of the larger, less helpful books to their places. I sat back down in the dark-stained wooden chair and poured over an interpretation of the final days, retelling the Book of Revelation.

"Sounds interesting," Osomatsu pulled out the chair next to mine from underneath the study table, the wood creaking as he leaned forward to read over my shoulder, "I haven't done a sermon on that in a while."

"You've taught on this before?" I looked towards him, making him lean away from me.

"It's a pretty popular topic, but a powerful one," He rested his chin on a gloved hand, the other reaching for the pen that I set on top of the notepad, "There are a lot of ways that you could interpret that book, and many details on what God's plan is for His followers."

My breath hitched as his fingers nimbly turned the notepad over, silence smothering my worry as Osomatsu read, 'Osomatsu - Choromatsu - Todomatsu = Angels? / Karamatsu - Ichimatsu - ??? = Demons?'

"I can explain..." My words were quiet between us.

"There's no need," He slid the notepad back to me, "You said that you had an idea in your head, and you were wanting answers."

"You're not mad?" I looked up at him, searching his face for an answer.

"Why would I be mad?" Osomatsu only looked curious, instead of insulted like I'd thought he'd be when I had written that his brothers were demons, "You said that it was only theory-crafting, not an accusation. If you have any questions about my brothers, I don't mind answering...but I don't want to see you torn up about this, (y/n)."

The tone shift in his voice made me look into his eyes, the worry in them forcing me to relax and sit back in my chair.

"Sorry, Father Osomatsu...I thought I could help heal your family."

"Don't worry about this, (y/n). We just want you to be happy wherever you are, and want to help you as much as we can," His breath danced across my lips before they were sealed in a kiss.

Chapter 12

A sigh escaped Osomatsu's lips as he leaned back in his office chair, the sermon fully edited on his computer as he waited for the printer on his desk to receive the document. His hands rubbed over his face as mental exhaustion kept trying to sink in after spending countless hours furiously typing out the sermon, sending it to his brothers for editing, re-editing their corrections and finalizing everything. Osomatsu tilted his head back until it lay on the chair, staring up listlessly at the ceiling.

He hadn't slept in who knows how many days, unable to rest while

they

were so close. The analog clock sounded each second as the printer spat out the sermon paper, the noise almost a comfort to Osomatsu's ears. One more day and then he could fully rest, as long as nothing messed up his plans.

When the printer finished, he straightened out and re-read everything on the paper for the hundredth time to ensure that everything was verbally acceptable before clipping them together and sliding it into a folder.

His mind wandered to (y/n), feeling elated that they were able to see her again after so long, and also feeling some pressure about showing off his speaking skills to her. Osomatsu had always strived for perfection, but with her so close now, he needed to absolutely be at his best.

A knock sounded on his closed door before it opened up, revealing a green-detailed cassock and the visibly upset man wearing it.

Osomatsu quietly turned to Choromatsu and only raised an eyebrow.

"(Y/n) is back at the shelter, escorted there by Karamatsu," The younger's eye twitched as he muttered the name, "It seems like they're getting closer."

"That's good news, then," Osomatsu reached up and began to play with the cloud-like emblem hanging off his stole, turning the metallic object about in his fingers.

"If you're sure of it. You know how dangerous that can be, especially with--
"

"I'm positive that it will be fine," The eldest cut him off, "(Y/n)'s arrival was an early surprise, but that can be used to our favor--"

"She's not carrying a child," Choromatsu harshly cut in, watching Osomatsu's reaction carefully. The emblem fell from his fingers as the eldest's eyes went wide with shock.

"What."

"I saw it for myself," Choromatsu took a breath, "She was leaving their clinic with Karamatsu, and she was not carrying the child. At some point between Thursday afternoon and this morning, it was removed from her."

A loud crack stopped him from continuing, but he didn't outwardly flinch.

Osomatsu released his grip from the shattered office chair arm, flexing his fingers as splinters of wood fell from his skin. A heavy sigh blew through his nostrils as Osomatsu nestled his chin into the palm of his left hand, leaning on the other arm of the chair as his right index finger tapped against his desk.

"Where is (y/n) now?" His dark eyes lifted up to Choromatsu.

"She was studying in the cathedral library when I passed by a little while ago. She seemed to be quite focused."

"Do you know the extent of what happened?" Osomatsu stood up and adjusted his clothing.

"No. Since I didn't walk her here, I couldn't gather any specific information," Choromatsu shook his head, straightening his glasses out

afterwards, "I do know that she didn't remove the child herself, but I couldn't get anything more."

"All right," Osomatsu took in a deep breath, "I'll go see what happened."

Choromatsu nodded before looking back at the shattered arm of the chair, "Want me to take care of that?"

"If you are able to. It's the most comfortable chair I've used so far and I'd like to keep it," A playful smirk crossed Osomatsu's lips as he left his office, taking long but slow strides towards the library. He and his brothers never really intended to watch over (y/n), but with the sporadic meetings they've had, it was hard to imagine what happened between when Choromatsu last saw her and this morning.

His finger tapped against his lips as he thought. With (y/n) working at Ichimatsu's little café, Osomatsu knew that the third youngest wouldn't do anything that foolish in that short span of time. Karamatsu wouldn't act out like that, either. The second oldest brother was too mellow and caring to influence a life like that.

Jyushimatsu.

The second youngest brother never really cared about the agreement the brothers had, always acting out impulsively -- especially with children. He seemed to have a soft spot for them.

Osomatsu clicked his tongue in annoyance before turning the corner to see the library doors closed. His eyebrow raised in curiosity; they were rarely closed unless there was a debate going on.

However, no debate was scheduled for this week.

Osomatsu pressed his right hand down on the lever, feeling the lock hitch and prevent the handle from depressing all the way. He took in a breath and released it slowly, covering the old keyhole with his left hand and focusing on the lock mechanism, feeling some ethereal part of him slip through the keyhole and entwine itself into the lock. The rusted parts fought against him

as he pulled the locking pin into place, the door clicking open as he took his left hand away. Quietly opening the door, he calmly took in the scene as he silently slipped into the room.

(Y/n) was slumped over a small pile of open books laid out on one of the study tables, her face twisted in agony as feminine fingers played with her hair. A lithe redheaded woman was kneeling on the books, her lips parting in an open smile before making a beckoning motion with her free hand. (Y/n) lightly moaned as colored smoke began to gather above her form, thickening into a fog that began to waft towards the woman's mouth.

"I wouldn't eat that if I were you," Osomatsu called out, keeping his face calm while facing the lithe woman. He recognized her instantly as the one Sister Totoko had assigned as (y/n)'s roommate. She was barely dressed and exposing way too much skin within the cathedral walls, but that wasn't the problem Osomatsu had with her at this point in time.

The woman gasped as she met his gaze, fear filling her eyes as she pulled away from (y/n), scrambling down the table and beginning to grovel on the floor, wincing with each step Osomatsu took towards her.

"I'm sorry! I didn't realize that this was the one under your protection...!" The woman's voice cracked with fear.

"You 'didn't realize'?" He stopped in front of the cowering figure, harshly glaring down at her. He knew how intimidating he looked as a red glow grew in his eyes and his hair took on a much wilder appearance than normal, "You were given clear instructions to leave her be."

"Her dream was so tempting, so full of emotion...I-I just couldn't help myself, my lor--"

Deep red flames instantly swallowed her form, the fire only consuming her body while leaving the carpet and table untouched. The flames crackled and roared, drowning out the screams as her figure crumbled into an ash pile, burning up even further until nothing remained.

Osomatsu continued to glare at the spot where the woman was, feeling a rush of adrenaline wash over his body and fighting off the elated feeling, holding back the smile that he normally would have embraced. His left arm trembled as he clenched his fist, straining the muscles and diverting most of his excited energy into it, allowing it to go to waste.

After his emotions were finally under control, he looked at (y/n), who was still slumped on the table. Lifting some of the hair out of her face, a gentle smile crossed his lips as he lightly pulled her into a sitting position, glancing down at whatever books she was looking through.

Old artwork of angels and demons were printed on some of the pages, each of the texts covering an interpretation of the Bible's Revelation. The yellow notepad caught his attention, with her handwriting scrawled on it with most of the brothers' names and an indication of 'angel?' or 'demon?' next to them. A huff of amusement escaped Osomatsu's lips as he picked (y/n) up.

"You've had a busy week, (y/n)," Osomatsu leaned down and rested his forehead on hers, "Sleep as long as you need. I'll be here if you need me."

My body felt warm, tossing off the sheets and turning over in my bed as I groaned uncomfortably. I opened my eyes to see the walls I'd grown accustomed to, the sun casting the last of its light onto the closed curtains.

I was still tired but I wanted to get comfortable quickly, peeling off the shirt and pants to trade them for the nightwear I had from Ichiro's drop-off. The cool fabric rested against my skin and made my body feel normal again, tucking myself underneath the bedsheets of my temporary bed.

Bed?

I propped myself up to take a second look, confirming that I was in my room and not in the library where...My hands flew up to my face, suddenly feeling heat in my cheeks.

Did Osomatsu really kiss me? Did we actually...make out in the library...?!

The feel of his lips on mine were too real, the soft whispers of his voice as his fingers trailed down my back. A heat stirred within my core as the mental image of Osomatsu in full priest clothing looked down at me, his gloved hands tangling in my hair as I begged for more.

Throwing off the sheets, I grabbed my towel and ran into the bathroom I was assigned to, thankful that no one was using it. Turning only the cold water knob, I quickly stripped down and stood in the freezing torrent of water, the temperature finally helping subside the persistent heat.

There was no way that Osomatsu and I did that...It couldn't have been real...

He was a priest -- a man of the cloth! Just entertaining the thought was a sin for us, regardless if I had wanted it to happen.

These feelings didn't come from nowhere. Did I really...love Osomatsu like that? Did I love

any

of the brothers like that?

The cold water continued to wash over me, my body beginning to shiver as the internal heat gave way to the external cold. Rinsing off the sweat from my sleep, I turned off the water and took my time drying with help from the towel, letting myself process whatever I was feeling.

It wasn't love but more of an appreciation for what they had done, I determined. There was no other connection than that and, while I still wanted to help the brothers out, I couldn't let that appreciation develop into something more. I couldn't risk damaging any of their reputations, regardless if they were involved with the church or not. I couldn't do anything with Ichimatsu due to the conflict of interest between a boss and his employee, Karamatsu seemed to be more of a good friend than a boyfriend, and I couldn't even entertain the thought of being with Osomatsu, Choromatsu, or Todomatsu. They had to maintain their celibacy

to keep their positions, and I wasn't a selfish enough person to demand they leave the clergy to satisfy my feelings.

No, there wasn't love there.

But

lust

was definitely present.

I slowly got dressed into my nightwear in the bathroom and dried my hair as I walked back to the room, noticing that my roommate's bed was empty. In fact, the whole side of her room was devoid of her things. She must've found a place to stay, then.

Looking back up at the analog clock in the room, it confirmed that it was nearing 8 p.m. and was definitely time to sleep if I was to make the morning Mass. As I hung the towel to dry on a hanger, I swallowed hard.

Todomatsu was in the confessional last time.

Maybe a silent confession about this would be best...

Chapter 13

The cathedral was packed.

My hands clenched the skirt of the borrowed dress I was wearing tightly, a sudden unease sweeping over me as I caught glances that looked at me strangely.

I had to remind myself that while the brothers knew who I was, the congregation did not and people tended to be suspicious of anyone that was new. My anxiety kicked into overdrive as I voluntarily sat in the back row, in the furthest seat from the main aisle, tucking my hands under my knees and staring down at the kneeling cushion in front of me.

I could only hope that whoever sat next to me didn't mind me copying them when I didn't remember what to do.

The congregation slowly filtered in through the narthex and into the nave, where the pews were filled up. I could hear some conversations pick up where some women were asking others about how their children were doing, men asking other men about work, and children giggling amongst themselves.

An organ began playing before a woman started to sing towards the front of the sanctuary, a hush instantly washing over the congregation as those who were standing found a seat. Shortly after, Father Osomatsu and two other young men walked into the sanctuary from the narthex, each man wearing the garb associated with an altar server while Osomatsu was dressed in full priest vestments, including a green chasuble. The green and white colors didn't seem to belong on Osomatsu's body, as I was so used to seeing him wear the black and red cassock.

I could only watch in silence as they knelt in front of the altar before the two attendants walked towards one of the transepts, leaving Osomatsu to

walk alone towards the chancel, a long marbled table with a pure white runner cloth covering the top.

After the song ended, Osomatsu greeted the congregation with a gentle voice, his annunciation clear and audible throughout the entire church. He started with the prayer I remembered hearing over and over as a child, responding softly when appropriate. He didn't show any signs of pain throughout his prayer, throwing out my doubt from yesterday that he was a demon.

I kept a close eye on Osomatsu as the Scriptures were read, not noticing any outward reaction other than a calm and peaceful look that he maintained throughout the Mass. With a quiet sigh, I mentally apologized to no one in particular before going with the flow: standing when everyone stood, kneeling when appropriate, and responding as others responded.

When the Eurcharist was being blessed by Osomatsu, I resigned to stay in my seat and not go up to the front. I knew how important the act was, but I wasn't prepared for it. As the row I was sitting in began to proceed to the front, I caught Osomatsu's eyes glancing at me before I looked down in embarrassment.

It wasn't a condemning look from him. Instead, he looked a little saddened before I turned away. If I knew my luck, then I'd be asked about why I didn't go up sometime later on.

After the Eucharist was given to those that wanted it, a moment of silence filled the cathedral as members of the congregation finished their individual prayers. Osomatsu gently started a blessing of the congregation, bringing the congregation's attention back to his words as he signed a cross in front of his body. The organ began to play and Osomatsu was flanked by the altar servers as he walked out of the sanctuary through the nave. The congregation was slow to disperse, but I stayed in my seat.

After a while, I found myself alone in the cathedral while some of the attendants began to put away some of the trays that were used during the communion. Standing up and patting down the borrowed dress, I ran a hand through my hair as I walked into the narthex.

"(Y/n)."

I flinched and shut my eyes, letting my hand drop as I slowly looked over towards Osomatsu. He simply stood there in full vestment, his hair combed neatly back and his dark eyes locked onto mine.

"Father Osomatsu," I softly responded, dipping my head a little in reverence.

He seemed to pause for a moment before a small smile crossed his lips, "How was it being back here? Not too different from when we were kids, right?"

"It seems like the only thing that's changed is me. I could remember a lot of the responses that Father Sakai drilled into us," I looked off to the side, trying to not dive back into my memories, "You did very well, Father Osomatsu."

"I don't think you've changed that much," Osomatsu laughed a little, "At least you didn't fall asleep like you did in the library."

I turned my head towards him quickly, opening my mouth to protest before closing it as questions in my head fought to be asked first.

"Do you...remember what happened in the library?" My fingers played with the seam of the dress, my eyes refusing to look at Osomatsu.

Another pause from him.

There's no way that it actually happened, right? I thought it was a dream...!

"We can talk about that in my office," Osomatsu turned towards the nave, "Do you remember where it is?"

"I think so," I watched him as he started to walk away.

"Dress comfortably, and I'll see you there."

Putting the dress back on its hanger, I left it on the doorframe of the woman who loaned it to me before leaving the shelter in more casual clothes: a comfortable pair of jeans and a long-sleeved colored shirt. Winding my way through the office building behind the cathedral, I passed by the library before finding Osomatsu's office and knocked on the closed door softly.

"Come in," His voice sounded tired.

I opened the door to see him turn in his chair away from the computer. His hair was still combed neatly, but he had taken off the vestments and donned the cassock he usually wore.

"(Y/n), please have a seat," He waved towards the two chairs in front of his desk, and I obliged after closing the door behind me.

"You wanted to talk...?" I scooted one of the chairs close to the desk.

"You had asked if I remembered what happened in the library, and I wanted to give you the answer in a more private setting."

I fought hard to keep the blush from spreading across my face.

"I was made aware of your arrival back at the shelter by Choromatsu and, a few moments later, I found you sleeping in the library on top of what looked to be very worrying topics," Osomatsu folded his hands neatly on the desk, concern written all over his face.

"Ah...you mean the 'demon/angel' thing...?" I looked down towards my lap, the color draining from my face.

"Was there something you wanted to talk to me about? Is everything all right?"

I had to be honest right now.

"No, not everything is all right," I looked right into his eyes, "I'm worried about what I've seen between you and your brothers, and the tension that Choromatsu and Karamatsu showed confirmed it for me yesterday. The angel and demon analogy was the only thing I could really think of that

made sense. If you, Todomatsu, and Choromatsu are angels, then of course the other three would be against you if they were demons."

Osomatsu stayed silent, and I took that as a sign to continue.

"I don't have any family, and I don't want to see you guys fight amongst yourselves. I want to help heal whatever hurt is there. You don't have to all be in harmony with each other, but I don't want you guys squaring up whenever you pass by each other on the street. It's not right..."

"What has Karamatsu told you?" His voice was quiet.

"He said that an incident happened between the six of you, and each half blames the other for the fallout," I tried to recite what Karamatsu told me yesterday, "He wouldn't go into detail, and I'm not asking for that...I just feel like I

need

to help."

Osomatsu gave me a small smile, but his eyes were full of sorrow.

"(Y/n), you have a tender heart for us. Yes, something did happen between us a long time ago, but there won't be any healing that you can do. It's none of your concern, and I don't want you dragged into it. I'm flattered that you think we're angels, but no...we are human. Gifted, but still human."

"Please, Osomatsu...you've helped me out so much this past week. You, Todomatsu, and Choromatsu. I want to help you out in return," I leaned against the desk, my hands keeping me steady as they pressed on the edge.

"You'll be given a chance to help, just not on this topic," Osomatsu reached out and rested a hand on my cheek, "Don't worry about it too much, all right?"

I pursed my lips a little, "All right..."

"Did you have a good dream while in the library?"

"I--" I cut myself off, looking away as I tried to figure out if I should tell the truth or not.

"You can be honest. I'm not going to judge," He laughed a little as he removed his hand from my face.

"I don't think you want to hear about it..."

"Why? Is it something that I wouldn't understand, or is it too embarrassing to say outloud?"

"You sure you're not gonna judge me if I tell you...?" I stole a glance towards Osomatsu, seeing the same smiling face as before.

"Not at all."

"I dreamt that you walked in while I was looking up passages, and we...uh, you..." I fought to keep the blush from reappearing, "You kissed me."

I hid my face in my arms, not wanting to see the shock on Osomatsu's face.

"Well, that's certainly not what I was expecting," He sounded calm, instead of flustered like I thought he would've been, "So, I kissed you in the dream. Did anything else happen...?"

I nodded a little before looking up at him, an eyebrow raised in curiosity, "Why do you want to know more?"

"I want to know how to pray for you during this confessional," The smile shifted into a smirk, "I figured that it wasn't something you'd want to tell Choromatsu or Todomatsu about, so I took the burden upon myself."

I held back a groan as my head dropped back onto my arms.

"You kissed me, I didn't stop you, and we made out like a romantic couple. It didn't go any further than that," I muttered each word, fighting between frustration at being caught by the man my subconscious ran wild with and embarrassment.

I heard Osomatsu move a little before silence took hold of the room. I figured he was doing whatever prayer he was taught for conducting confessionals, and let the silence remain until he broke it.

"God forgives you of your sins, both spoken and unspoken. Be at peace and go with God's grace," He sighed softly before I felt his hand on my head again, "Do you have any plans for today?"

"No..." My arms muffled my answer.

"There's a soup kitchen tonight, if you'd like to come. Choromatsu and I will be there."

"...maybe..."

"If not, then I pray you have a better day than you did last week," Osomatsu lifted his hand, "I've got a meeting in a few moments, unfortunately, so I need to be on my way."

"Oh, I'm sorry...I wouldn't have taken up so much time if I'd known," I quickly stood up and made my way towards the door.

A presence behind me made me pause as my hand held the lever, feeling like someone was leaning against my back. My nerves prickled with tension as my brain tried to convince me that someone was reaching around me, the fight-or-flight response kicking off as part of me wanted to run out of the office while the other wanted me to challenge the presence head on. Cautiously looking behind me, I only saw Osomatsu sitting at his desk still.

There was

no one

behind me.

"I didn't think it would be an issue, (y/n). Be safe," He smiled widely as he waved at me. I waved back before leaving the room, closing the door behind me and making my way back towards the homeless shelter.

What was it that I felt in Osomatsu's office...?

Chapter 14

I closed the book in my hands, sighing as frustration grew at the author's decision to write a cliffhanger at the end before sliding the book back into place on the bookshelf in the common area. The hours had passed slowly, with the tenants of the shelter walking in and out of the common area to do various chores, or to head to a destination. I pulled my legs up to my chest after settling in the reading chair again, laying my chin on my knees and giving another silent sigh.

The soup kitchen didn't open for another thirty minutes, so there wasn't enough time for me to get lost in another book. I shifted my gaze from the floor to the large portrait painting of the man the shelter was named after, St. Benedict Joseph Labre. The posture was one I was familiar with, as most of the saints were painted in the delicate, beseeching position with their eyes turned upwards. The painting was beautifully framed in real wood, carved to look like vines and leaves of ivy curling around one another and stained into a cherry wood color.

The laughter of a child stirred me from my thoughts, a young boy running through the room and pulling my attention from the painting with his outfit. The boy's white pressed shirt was buttoned up with a red-and-white tartan checkered tie wrapped around his collar, complimenting the grey pants and black uniform shoes. I recognized the tartan color instantly. After all, I wore it for a few years at the school here. His face brought back memories as he looked towards me, a playful and mischievous smirk pulling at the corners of his mouth as his dark hair bounced with each step, a red tint catching the light.

Osomatsu...?

I carefully climbed out of the chair and followed at a distance, watching the child turn around a corner near the entrance and leave my line of sight. I ran to catch up, bewildered at the thought of there being a child that looked

exactly

like Osomatsu did as a kid.

Turning the corner in the hallway, I found myself in a pitch-black room looking at the rich mahogany doors of the school with six people standing in front of it, or rather...two men and four children. I walked a little closer to see that the people were carved out of wax, unmoving but full of expression. The three boys were crying, one of the men holding one of them back as the child tried to reach out to the girl being led away by the second man.

I knew

exactly

what was going on.

This was the day that I was fostered out of the children's home.

Osomatsu, Choromatsu, Todomatsu, and I had been playing in the school yard before we were confronted and I was told about the 'good' news. It was a whirlwind event, with me being rushed to pack my few belongings and escorted out the door while the three brothers tried to keep me at the school with them.

The wax figures melted and formed a new moment, the scenery changing to that of a classroom as the wax clumped into four figures. One was standing by the chalkboard and partially turned towards three others that arranged themselves into who I could only guess were pre-teenager Osomatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu.

Osomatsu leaned over a school desk with a look of accusation, while Choromatsu glanced up from his textbook and Todomatsu seemed to approach Osomatsu with a cautious hand raised to him. The wax figures didn't move, but I heard a conversation pick up from all around me.

"That's not right!" The young Osomatsu cried out.

"What's not right, young Matsuno, is the fact that your grades have dropped substantially despite all warning that you'll be removed from the program if you continued with this behavior," The teacher sounded stern, like an old man that was set in his ways, "I had some hope that you'd excel, but with you dropping your duties in the church and your grades on the decline, the deacons have told me to withdraw you."

"Big brother--" I heard Todomatsu whimper before Osomatsu cut him off.

"No! Give me one more chance!" I heard a desk get pushed around, but nothing in the scenery moved, "Just one more is all I ask! I

need

to be in this program..."

"Then prove it by the end of the semester," The teacher sighed after a little while, "If you're able to get your grades up by then, I'll reconvene with the deacons to see if they're willing to keep you in."

Osomatsu laughed a little in relief, "I won't let you down."

The wax figures collapsed to the ground, gathering together before dividing into four males as the scenery changed once more into an open field, the daylight fading into dusk. I moved closer to the figures, seeing a slightly older Osomatsu, Choromatsu, and Todomatsu in priest garments facing across from an older male whose appearance sent chills down my spine.

The angry scowl that sent fear racing through my nerves, his furrowed brow that never seemed to lift in happiness.

My foster father.

My abuser.

"What the fuck do you brats want, huh?" His gruff voice bit out and I took a few steps back on instinct, fearing that the wax figure would come to life and raise his hand against me.

"We want to know if you have any sins you'd like to confess to," Choromatsu stated calmly.

"Why do a bunch of 18-year-olds want to know? It's none of you or your God's business!"

"It actually

is

our business," Osomatsu started, "You fostered a little girl named (l/n) (y/n) quite a few years ago, and we've come to pay back the debt that you're owed."

"Oh, yeah?" The man's tone shifted from arrogant to guarded surprise, "Then lay it on me."

"Of course, after we find out if our sources were correct."

"What do you need to know?"

"She no longer lives with you, is this right?" I heard some kind of cloth shift, but the wax figures remained still.

"Yeah, my ex-wife took her, along with most of the house...that bitch."

"Ah, then it's all good news."

The sound of gunfire erupted around me, making me scream and duck for cover behind Todomatsu. My foster father screeched and yelled out in terror before I heard the sound of crackling flames and fluttering papers fill the area, making me cover my ears with my hands at the intensity.

It sounded like an all-out war.

The noise slowly died down and I looked around Todomatsu's arm to see the wax figure of my foster father partially melted with multiple wax rods sticking out of his body. I could only stare.

Did the brothers...actually

kill

my foster father?

I couldn't form any words. I knew that he was labelled as missing after the police had searched his apartment when he failed to show up for a court date and hadn't found him. My foster mother and I had moved away after their divorce, only finding out about it after seeing a 'missing persons' bulletin.

The wax gathered itself together once more before separating into three figures, a male crouching on the floor with two standing over him in aggressive positions. I recognized the teenage Osomatsu as the crouched man, the wax detailing an angry expression that I've never seen on his face before, glaring up at the two other men. The wax started to fill in equally aggressive expressions, their facial features recognizable to me as Karamatsu and Ichimatsu, both of them close to the same age as Osomatsu.

Was this the incident...? What happened?

The wax figures crumbled as I blinked in confusion, the scenery fading into the common area of the homeless shelter. I was still in a curled up position, having never moved an inch from my spot, as a boy's laughter echoed in the room. I rubbed my eyes as I heard some of the children playing in the toy area nearby, none of them appearing to be the Osomatsu lookalike.

Stifling a yawn, I glanced at the clock to see that the soup kitchen had opened almost twenty minutes ago. Stretching and adjusting my clothing, I left the shelter to walk towards the cathedral, following the signs until I saw a line protruding from one of the side doors. There were quite a few other people in front of me, but with the line moving as quickly as it was, I was inside the building in only a few minutes.

The dream I had was definitely weird, and more startling than anything else if I was honest with myself. In fact, the past few dreams had been weird. It was like I was seeing events that I should've never seen with my own eyes.

Was my mind playing tricks and making my reality into a fantasy, weaving some kind of story whenever I slept?

"Evening, (y/n)."

I was startled from my thoughts to see Osomatsu standing in front of me, holding a pair of tongs while a long table separated us with various dishes spread out over its length. I held a tray with a cup of water and a paper plate, unsure of how I got the items.

"Father Osomatsu..."

"Do you know what meat you'd like?" He gave a simple smile, clicking the tongs as if accentuating his point.

"Oh," I took a look at the spread, "I'll take the grilled chicken breast, please."

"There you go," He picked up the breast and gently put it on my plate, "I'm glad to see you here."

"Ah...yeah," I tried to give him a smile, but the wax dream resurfaced in my mind again.

Did that actually happen...?

I was served some mashed potatoes and gravy, along with green beans, before finding a place to sit at an empty table. There weren't a lot of people here yet, but I could see Choromatsu walking amongst the tables and talking with people. The meal itself was pretty good, and I debated between waiting for Choromatsu to stop by or to just leave. Before I could make up my mind, though, I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked over to see Choromatsu sitting down next to me.

"Father Choromatsu," I nodded my head in respect. He simply smiled and put something down on the table before sliding it towards me.

"We had found this in our 'lost and found' earlier, and it seems to be registered to you. I wanted to give it back," He pulled his gloved hand away

to reveal a flip cell phone, seemingly brand new with a note tucked inside. I raised an eyebrow in curiosity as I took out the note.

'It's one of our old phones, installed with a new number and all old data wiped from its memory. Keep it as long as you need it.'

I looked back up at Choromatsu in surprise, fumbling for words before a 'thank you' tumbled from my lips.

"Think nothing of it," He smiled for a brief moment before his face fell into his usual neutral position, standing back up to continue moving by the tables as more people began to enter.

I looked back down at the phone in my hands, flipping it open and seeing a default background on the screen. My head fought back and forth between my dream and the actions that I had seen while I was awake.

What was going on? Were they just really worried about me?

What had happened between the brothers?

Chapter 15

I stood up straight and twisted my back, feeling the tension grow tighter before a semi-muffled crack sounded from my spine. The relief was instant, and I yawned before returning to the dirty dishes that remained in the sink.

Monday had passed quickly, much to my satisfaction. The day had started with work being much more tame than Friday's shift, and the café closed two hours earlier due to it not being a terribly busy day. Ichimatsu seemed to have a pretty accurate schedule for the area, timing the store hours for when the crowds were their largest.

After throwing out the garbage, I drained and washed the sinks after putting the dishes in the air dryer, wiping my hands clean of water. Reaching for the kitchen door, the metal plate smashed into my hand when the door unexpectedly opened up, revealing Ichimatsu as his eyes swept around the area before settling on me. I shook it out in pain, but didn't complain when our eyes met.

"Meet me in my office," His half-lidded eyes didn't hold any kind of tension, but I still couldn't help but feel suspicious of why I was being called.

"Where is your office...?"

"Through the door on the left and up the stairs," He closed the door as he left, leaving me alone in the kitchen. I opened the door after him and noticed a 'DO NOT ENTER' sign on the door he directed me through, watching as Ichimatsu walked towards the cats. Raising an eyebrow in confusion, I opened the indicated door and ascended the staircase, only to stand in a studio apartment.

The apartment was mostly furnished, so Ichimatsu must live here instead of travelling to and from his business. I saw a few other cats lounging on the couch that was pushed against the wall, leaving ample room for a coffee

table and a closet that looked like it could hide a bed. A kitchenette was on my right, offering most of the appliances a full kitchen would have, but packed into a smaller space.

I didn't make a move to sit anywhere until I heard the door close from the stairway, watching as Ichimatsu walked towards the couch. Maybe I wasn't meant to sit anywhere...?

"Despite the rough start you've had, you've done well here," Ichimatsu started without any ceremony, "Payday is every Friday, and I pay my workers by cash only."

"Okay."

"Just continue to work the same hours, and we won't have another problem," The tone he used sounded dismissive, "As long as you continue to do what you're doing in the café, I don't mind hiring you full-time."

"Oh...thank you! I'll keep working hard," I gave a bow in respect before heading down the staircase, grabbing my sweatshirt from the employee closet and walking out the front door. My heart thudded happily as a smile grew on my face.

A full time job!

With the pay rate that Ichimatsu was paying me, I would be able to afford a decent apartment in a few weeks. I only had a phone bill to pay, but that was cheap enough that I could use the rest for rent and groceries. I'd need to extend the time I'll be staying at the shelter quite a bit, much more than the few days I originally told them, but they didn't seem to mind my current extension. When I had a decent amount saved, I'd start looking for apartments.

The evening air was slightly chilly, but not cold to the point that I'd need my jacket on immediately. It was a ways back to the shelter, and I kept the phone that Choromatsu gave me in hand as I walked through the streets. The street lights turned on as the sun sank beneath the horizon, casting

oranges and reds onto the upper levels of the buildings while the people in the streets hurried to get home from their late-night jobs.

It was a much different atmosphere than the early mornings. I yawned again, hidden by my hand covering my mouth. My sleep hadn't been the best in recent nights, and I was looking forward to crashing in bed tonight. The dream about the three brothers killing my foster father had played over and over in my mind, plaguing me and keeping me from getting any kind of decent rest. I didn't know if I should bring that up to them at all. I didn't want them to lie to me, but I didn't really want to know the truth about it, either...

A man with auburn hair ran past me, distracting me from my thoughts. I watched as he turned a street corner, catching a brief glimpse of his face that was set in slight panic.

...Ichiro?

What is

he

doing here?

My feet carried me to the street corner where I had seen him turn, witnessing him talk with two others in long coats that looked too warm for the temperature. All three of them walked into an alleyway, vanishing from my line of sight. I turned away from the corner and started to walk back towards the shelter, partially intent on ignoring what I saw.

If I don't approach them, I won't know what's going on...but why did Ichiro look so panicked? No, I don't need to concern myself with him anymore, remember?

Debating with myself, I looked behind me to see a priest calmly walking towards the alleyway. The pink color in the details gave away his identity, but the smiling face Todomatsu usually had was cold. I pressed myself against the side of the building, watching him from around the corner as he

casually looked at the alleyway before stepping in. I knew that if I got closer, I'd be in possible danger. Nothing good has happened to me in an alleyway recently...

But I have to find out what was going on.

Crossing the street when it was clear, I inched towards the alleyway and peeked around the corner. Todomatsu stood in the middle of the alley, surrounded by Ichiro and the other two figures in long coats. The three seemed tense or angry, and I couldn't pick out what emotion Todomatsu was in from his body language.

"Gentlemen, there's no need for this to be dragged out much longer," Todomatsu sighed, sounding rather tired or on the verge of exhaustion, "Tonight has been a very busy night, and I'd like to finish my duties before midnight."

"After your hunt last night, that's all you have to say?" 'Ichiro' laughed, the panic in his face completely gone, "You and your brother ruined most of our achievements here!"

"Oh, is that what you're calling it now?" Todomatsu reached up to his face, "You're not really worth their time anymore, so I'd really like this to end without a fight. Please don't offer any resistance--"

"You slaughter our brethren, and you think that we're just gonna lay down? That's a laughable offer coming from a demon," The one closest to the alley entrance growled as he flexed his fingers.

A demon...? Todomatsu...?

My heart skipped a beat as I held my breath.

"You think that's an insult, Fallen?" He turned towards the one that spoke, and I pulled myself back from the corner to avoid being seen, "I've fought your kind many times. You should already know that if you want to scare me into retreating, you'll have to bring a higher rank."

"Don't get cocky," I heard a rustling, drawing my eyes back into the alley. The one that spoke had thrown off his jacket, revealing a bright light that lit the entire alley, "We may not be one of the Powers, but we know we can still stand toe-to-toe with you if you're this tired!"

The light partially faded and I could only stare open-mouthed at the men. The three surrounding Todomatsu had taken on completely different forms; their skin barely glowing with some kind of inner light, and two large wings spread wide from each of their backs. There were no feathers on the wings, but rather there were multiple streams of light that pulsed softly like a heartbeat, twisting into the vague shape of wings.

"Oh, that's sad, actually," I heard Todomatsu yawn, "I was told that one of you was a Principality...Instead, I got three Angels and no challenge. Maybe your boss is away on better business...?"

He shrugged off the chemisette cloth, opened his cassock wide and pulled out some kind of contraption with a long and thick barrel, the black metal catching the light from the three angels around it. A wind began to whip up around Todomatsu as flames started to emerge from his body, licking at the cassock until he was fully engulfed in flames. His dark hair was tossed about by the wind, fully revealing two pink horns that curled around and upwards on either side of his head.

I pulled away in shock, clamping a hand over my mouth to prevent my surprise from being heard.

Todomatsu

was

a demon...! How?! How was he a demon when he's a priest?!

The sound of thunderous gunfire echoed through the alley, the bassy noise nearly matching what I had heard in the dream. I shifted my hands from my mouth to my ears, trying to block out the sound as tears started streaming down my face.

There was

no way

that what I saw in my dreams were real!

If Todomatsu was a demon...then were Osomatsu and Choromatsu demons, as well?

'I'm flattered that you think we're angels, but no...we are human. Gifted, but still human.'

Osomatsu's words echoed in my head as the noise from the alleyway died down. I risked taking a small look.

There was no blood, no gore or viscera splattered against the walls like I was expecting. Instead, Todomatsu was kneeling in front of the bodies that lay limp on the ground, the pink horns no longer visible. I heard him quietly mumble, as if saying a prayer for the three men, before standing up and readjusting the discarded chemisette over his shoulders. I huddled out of sight behind an elevated garden bed as Todomatsu walked out, the priest completely bypassing me and making his way back to where he had come from.

I ducked into the alley, moving closer to the bodies to see if my mind was playing tricks on me. The bodies were still with no visible wounds, no bullet holes or rods sticking out of their bodies, but my eyes caught dark scorch marks underneath each body. I followed the marks with my eyes until I realized that each scorch mark was in the pattern of a wing, two marks for each body that overlapped with the other marks. I knelt by the man I thought was Ichiro, his eyes closed to the night sky as I pushed the bangs away from his face. His skin was cold as I pulled the collar of his shirt to see a vacant spot where a tiger tattoo should be.

He's not Ichiro...

"Oh..." A female voice softly whispered behind me, making me turn in shock to see a woman about my age standing with a hand over her mouth.

Her long brown hair was tied into a braid, but the hair close to her face was loose and blowing about in the breeze, "You shouldn't have seen that."

"Wh--" I couldn't finish my question as my body suddenly felt heavy and fatigued beyond its limits. I collapsed onto the ground, falling into darkness and pulled deep into sleep.

////

"

They

struck again," A man sighed as he sat down on a couch, a hand running through his blue-tinted hair, "We're drawing closer to the deadline, and the ones we talk to can't seem to get it through their heads. Too much time here has made them lazy--"

"You expect me to do something about it, *****?" Another man stroked his hand over a short-haired cat, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

"We had agreed that this would've been taken care of before ***** made his move and forced ***** to come back," The man on the couch waved his hand uselessly in the air, "Now, we only have a few days to make them understand before--"

"Use *****."

A new voice drew the attention of the other two towards a window, a third man stepping in from the windowsill. They both seemed to bristle at his sudden appearance, along with uneasy glances towards a hazy, blurred figure next to him.

"No way. ***** isn't part of this, and I'm not willing to drag her into our fights," The man on the couch stood up, clenching his fists aggressively.

"If ***** gets caught up on her own...then would you consider it?" The third man asked, not moving from his spot. The question seemed to throw off the others.

"What do you mean?" The man sitting on the floor moved the cat down from his lap.

"She saw ***** tonight," The third man sounded like he had a jovial tone, "When he was cleaning up *****'s failure."

Silence filled the room. The man with the blue-tinted hair looked from the one by the window to the one sitting on the floor, before looking at the newcomer again.

"If *****'s involved, then I will do what I can to keep her out of harm's way."

"That's not your job," The man sitting on the floor stood up suddenly, walking towards the one by the couch before grabbing his shirt front and dragging him close, "That's not ANY of our jobs!"

"I

know

it's not our job, *****, but we can't risk another incident between them and those who are innocent. ***** is too driven by his desire, and we all know that he's somehow roped ***** into his plans."

"You know he means to kill us, too," The second man released the other man's shirt, partially pushing him away in frustration, "The bastard knows we're all in town now, and won't let us get away."

"Then we take the fight to them," The third man laughed lightly, "We're part of the Virtues, and I've seen how they fight against those under us. I know they're vulnerable to our abilities in their cursed state."

"You can't be sure of that," The other two men sounded skeptical.

"I can, and I'll prove it. Give me two nights," He held up two fingers on his left hand, "That's when I'll challenge ***** and win."

"You know he won't come alone," The man with blue-tinted hair scoffed, rubbing his eyes in frustration before looking at the third man with realization, "You want us to distract the other two..."

"Exactly," The third man shifted his hand into a thumbs up sign, "You take *****, and ***** takes on *****. We can finish this and go back to our circle before the deadline is up."

"That's reckless...He won't fall for it," The second man shook his head.

"You're right. He wouldn't move unless ***** is involved, and I've already made sure of that."

The man by the couch fell back onto it heavily, his head in his hands.

"...the baby."

////

Opening my eyes took some effort, the sunrise barely peeking into the room as I sat up in bed, stretching my arms over my head. My body felt so much better after sleeping, no longer feeling the fatigue that overwhelmed me on my way home...

That didn't sound right...

I...never made it back...

Tossing off the sheets and glancing at the clock, I was relieved that I had some time before my shift started, grabbing clean clothes and going through my early morning routine.

What was I doing last night? There wasn't anything to unload for the café, so why was I completely exhausted last night?

I reached the kitchen without realizing what I was doing, grabbing a banana and a juice box before heading towards the front lobby. Scarfing down the fruit and draining the juice box, I tossed the garbage in the receptacle by the lobby door before something caught my eye.

Or rather, someone.

A pink-lined cassock disappeared into Sister Totoko's office, bringing a flash memory to mind, the doorframe of the office briefly turning into a darkened alleyway. I tried to think harder about the image before being bombarded with the entirety of what happened last night: the confrontation, the sounds of a fight, the appearance of Todomatsu.

I panicked.

Running out of the homeless shelter, I ran towards the café. The faster I could distract myself, the better I would be throughout the day. Overthinking never did me any good.

"Be careful...!"

I bumped into someone, blinded to whoever was in my way. The fear subsided as apologies flew from my lips, a black-and-red cassock clearing in my vision as I actually looked at whom I ran into.

Osomatsu...!

"Are you all right, (y/n)? You look stressed about something," His voice was calm yet concerned, his eyebrows pressed together in worry, "What's going on?"

Thoughts whirled in my head, dreams and reality colliding in my brain as I tried to think of something to say. I wanted to tell him what I saw; I wanted to keep it a secret. Opposing thoughts danced on my tongue before I looked up at him, opening my mouth to say...

Choice Poll Closed!

My readers have spoken, and they want the truth to be told!

Well, let's see where this gets us...

Chapter 16

"I know what's going on. At least, I think I do..."

"(Y/n)...?" Osomatsu sounded a little more worried, "What do you mean?"

I looked up at him, meeting and holding his concerned gaze.

"I know what you and your brothers are."

I was expecting some kind of angry reaction, either shock or surprise to what I had said. Instead, he held his expression of concern.

"Are...you confusing this with what you were studying in the library? Do we need to talk about this?"

"No, Osomatsu," I dropped the title, narrowing my eyes a little in frustration, "I saw Todomatsu last night. I saw the aftermath of what he did."

The man closed his eyes and rubbed his face with his right hand, leaning back a little as he seemed to figure out what to say. Placing both hands on his hips and slightly leaning forward, he rocked on his heels for a few moments before suddenly grabbing my elbow and wheeling me towards his office. I didn't have time to stop or argue about what he was doing before he guided me into the building, swiftly closing the office door behind us.

"What th--"

"What did you see exactly, (y/n)?" He didn't move from the door, as if intending to keep me here until he got his answers. The tone Osomatsu used was unusually deep, almost threatening.

I told him everything since I first set foot in the cathedral, including the dreams that I had. His demeanor shifted throughout my confession, flowing from anger to understanding before settling on a quiet calm. Osomatsu

listened to everything I had to say without interrupting me, letting me speak about everything that was bothering me, including the odd dreams that I've had since I first worked at the Cat Garden.

Finally able to breathe, I only looked at Osomatsu, watching him as he studied me.

"I'm not sure what to say..." The words were quiet in the silence.

"I just want the truth, Osomatsu...What's going on? Did you really kill my foster father?"

"The truth is very complicated, (y/n)."

"That's not an answer," I creased my eyebrows together in frustration.

"It doesn't change the fact," Osomatsu took a few steps towards me, "I don't know how, but what you saw in your dreams did happen. Todomatsu did confront Ichimatsu about his decision, and...we did kill your foster father."

The words packed more of a punch than I thought they would. To hear Osomatsu actually confess to the murder...I didn't know what I was expecting, but I didn't think I'd feel this upset.

Osomatsu's gloved hands gently grabbed my shoulders, my knees almost hitting the ground before he caught me. Without uttering a word, he carried me over to the couch and sat me down, pulling one of the chairs from in front of his desk and sitting across from me. I stayed silent as he seemed to gather his thoughts, taking in several breaths before finally speaking.

"When I heard of what he had done to you and your foster mother, I became angry. Angry that I couldn't do anything to help you, angry that this had even happened to you...angry that the church had deemed it appropriate for you to be fostered there," He held my gaze, "So, yes, I took matters into my own hands. Choromatsu and Todomatsu were equally as angry, but the blame lies solely on me for taking action."

"But...why...?" I couldn't stop my voice from trembling, "Why not let the police take care of it...?"

"They didn't act fast enough for me," Osomatsu gently reached out a hand and held my left cheek, "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it, and I've already paid the consequences for my actions. I would've told you sooner, but I had no idea of how to go about it...so I just acted like nothing had happened, and that was wrong of me to do."

I didn't know how to feel.

I was happy that the bastard got what he deserved, but I was grieving because the brothers were the ones to deliver the final blow. I felt loved knowing they'd go that far for me, and I was terrified to know how much further they'd go if someone else was abusive towards me.

My mind was a wreck.

"(Y/n)..." Osomatsu's soft voice brought my attention back to him, his thumb rubbing against my slick cheek made me realize that I had started crying, "You're going to be okay."

"I know..." My voice sobbed, "I didn't want you all to find out..."

"I didn't want you to find out like this..." His voice came closer before I felt him rest his forehead against mine, keeping his hand on my cheek. We sat in silence for a little while before I heard him take a breath, "That last dream of yours...with the three men?"

"Mm-hmm?"

"Are you sure that they mentioned a baby?"

"Yeah...I don't know why, but that's what I heard," I opened my eyes to look at him, "I wouldn't even say that the meeting actually took place...it was just a dream."

...right?

"It's possible, but considering you know about events when we weren't even talking, I'm going to err on the side of caution," Osomatsu sighed as he pulled away from me, releasing his hand on my cheek and fully leaning back into the chair. He looked at the clock and winced a little, "You'd better hurry. I think your shift is starting soon."

I turned to see that I was supposed to leave five minutes ago. With a gasp, I bolted up and left the office, wiping my face off with my sleeves as I felt an odd calm sweep over me. I had just heard Osomatsu confess to killing my foster father, the man that had abused me for so many years...and I was

okay

with it.

Is this what true peace felt like?

He couldn't help but smile as (y/n) ran from his office, shouting goodbyes as she went. When the office door closed, his face hardened into a frown.

Two days.

Jyushimatsu had set a deadline for two days, and the fifth brother was

confident

that he'd win.

Osomatsu wasn't sure which part ticked him off more. Jyushimatsu had already done enough meddling, and tried to arrange the odds in his favor multiple times. First, it was spreading his influence around the city and when (y/n) came back, he used her to poke and prod at the other three brothers.

Who was the one manipulating people, little Jyushimatsu?

The black-and-red cassock clad priest roughly shoved the chair back into place as he walked past his desk, settling into his own office chair and turning towards his computer. Quickly typing out an email to Sister Totoko, he reached over and paged Choromatsu's office.

"Go ahead."

"They're making their move."

"How do you know?"

"They're using (y/n)," Osomatsu sighed as the call dropped. He slightly closed his eyes, knowing that Choromatsu was on his way to the office. A few moments later, the door burst open before slamming shut, the green-colored priest holding Osomatsu in his furious glare.

Osomatsu barely hid a smirk at his appearance.

"You have proof?"

"(Y/n) told me herself. One from Jophiel's legions is with the other three, most likely," Osomatsu rubbed his thumb against the index and middle finger of the same hand, feeling (y/n)'s tears still damp on the fabric, "That would explain why she's been getting dreams of us lately..."

"Jophiel? Didn't we already warn her to gather those under her?" Choromatsu lost some of the anger he held, standing a little taller.

"We did, and she supposedly obeyed us."

"Which means there's one of hers that has become Fallen," The green-clad priest readjusted his glasses, pushing them up a little on the bridge of his nose.

"Fallen or not, they were kind enough to warn us that we have two days before our brothers make a move," Osomatsu leaned forward in his office chair, "Including today."

"What does that mean for us?"

The priest in the chair only smiled in response.

I scrambled to give the customers their orders, not quite falling behind but struggling to keep up as the lunch rush hit its peak. Takeda was able to help me with some of my chores, and I assisted as I could with his assignments before Ichimatsu closed the café after the lunch rush. I only stood still to catch my breath before rolling up my proverbial sleeves and buckling down on my afternoon chores.

Washing and drying the dishes were never hard, and I quite enjoyed doing them as it gave me time to think about the conversation I had with Osomatsu only a few hours earlier. He seemed extremely sorrowful when he confirmed what I had dreamt about, which meant that everything else in that dream was probably real, too. I hadn't asked what Osomatsu had done to make Karamatsu and Ichimatsu angry with him...but I was working for one of them, so maybe I could ask at a better time?

I shook my head at that line of thought. There was no way to guarantee that Ichimatsu would talk to me like Osomatsu does, considering he seems to remain distant no matter what. Ichimatsu didn't even seem to treat Todomatsu very well, so who knows how he would treat me when I asked such a personal question.

Dipping the last dish into the sanitized water, I went through the café to gather the garbage and dirty cat dishes, making my way around the eating area quickly as Ichimatsu was talking with Takeda about something. Retreating back into the quiet space of the kitchen, I scraped off the leftover food on the plates and dumped them in the sudsy water to soak.

My thoughts drifted back to Osomatsu's question.

'Are you sure that they mentioned a baby?'

I raised an eyebrow at why he picked that detail out of the conversation I relayed. It seemed weird. I wasn't pregnant, and never have been according

to the OB/GYN at the clinic. My uterine wall was too damaged to carry an egg right now.

My mind replayed Friday night after work, the intense pain I had felt before I passed out. I was thankful to Ichimatsu for bringing me to Karamatsu's home, and even more thankful to Karamatsu for helping me out that morning. It had confused me why I wasn't in a hospital, but with almost no pain after waking up, I had convinced myself that it was a really bad cramp episode.

What if it was more than that, though...?

What if...I was actually pregnant?

I disagreed with myself. The doctor had said that there was scarring, so it was probably my body figuring out what to do with itself.

I paused in my washing.

But I had actually thought I was pregnant before taking the test...

I still hadn't heard of anyone losing a baby like that, where their womb shredded itself to get rid of the egg.

"(Y/n)," Ichimatsu's voice startled me from my thoughts, "Would you be able to make a run to the bakery again? We're going to need more bread and flour."

"Oh, sure!" I let the dishes sit in the sink as I washed off my hands, drying them before grabbing a small pad of paper and a pencil, "The usual stuff?"

"Yeah, that'll be fine," He nodded slightly as he walked out of the kitchen. I scribbled down the order from the instructional folder before leaving through the back door, speed walking towards the bakery to beat the foot traffic. After making it to the bakery and having them fill the urgent order, I started my way back to the café, careful of the paper bag in my arms.

I heard some excited children scream in joy as I passed a playground, looking over to see quite a few children clambering over the equipment. A

man and a woman watched over them from a nearby bench, possibly their teachers or chaperones. As if sensing me looking at him, the man turned towards me. His face made me stumble a little.

The same face as Osomatsu and Karamatsu...

My thoughts stopped when the woman looked towards me, as well. Her long brown hair was done up in a loose braid, the hair close to her face was loose and blowing about in the breeze. The spitting image of the woman I saw before I passed out after seeing Todomatsu in the alley.

My breathing became labored as I closed the back door behind me, unsure of when I got back to the café. I put the bread and flour away as my heart continued to race.

Why was the woman with one of the brothers?

Chapter 17

I shook my head to clear my thoughts, setting down the cat food after the café closed, trying to push aside the memory of the woman that I had seen last night sitting next to the smiling man with the same face as Osomatsu. The more I tried to ignore it, the clearer his image became, as if to taunt me with his wide smile.

"...watch yourself..."

A strong grip yanked my right wrist above my head, the majority of my weight held aloft by whoever was holding it. It took a few seconds for me to realize that I had slipped and nearly hit my head on one of the counters in the kitchen, looking up my arm to see a male hand wrapped around my wrist. The pressed purple sleeve gave away who it was instantly before I met his hooded gaze, a frown forever pressing the corners of his lips down.

"Sorry..." I tucked my feet back under me and stood back up without assistance, feeling the pressure from my wrist tighten a little before Ichimatsu released his grip. A silent question was held in his stare, but I looked away before I could acknowledge it.

"You were distracted," He didn't move from where he was, tucking his hands into his pockets while watching me carefully as I straightened myself out.

"I need to ask you a question, Ichimatsu," I swallowed my nervousness and turned to face him, seeing the same neutral face as before. He slightly narrowed his eyes in reply, and I took a slow breath in, "What happened between you, Karamatsu, and Osomatsu?"

"You don't need to know that," His expression didn't even shift.

"I know what you are, as well as your other brothers," I lowered my voice, "I know that Osomatsu did something to anger you and Karamatsu. I just want to know what it was. Was it killing my foster father?"

If I struck a nerve, Ichimatsu didn't show it. The silence lasted for a few seconds before he took a breath.

"My office, five minutes."

Uh-oh.

He walked out of the kitchen, maintaining eye contact until he passed the door. I felt my mouth dry instantly in worry.

Had I taken this a step too far? Should I not have mentioned anything at all?

The smiling man wearing Osomatsu's face resurfaced in my head, the grin twisting into an ugly sneer. I covered my eyes with both of my hands and pushed in slightly, causing colored static to dance in my head. After a few seconds, I released the pressure and took in a breath, turning back to the last bit of my job duties and powering through them.

The smiling man no longer appeared in my head.

I sat on the couch while Ichimatsu and Karamatsu sat on folding chairs in front of me. Karamatsu had somehow come in without detection, despite the front door being locked and no one came through the back door while I was finishing my chores. If he really was an angel, then I wasn't going to question how he did it. They both had a serious expression on their face, but didn't move to speak.

I felt like I had to break the ice, essentially.

"I want to know what happened between you two and Osomatsu," I looked between the two men, holding their gaze as I did.

"You mean to say that you want to know about the

incident

," Karamatsu crossed his right leg over his left.

I only nodded. The air in the room seemed to grow heavy, pressing down on me like a weighted blanket. Seconds felt like minutes underneath the brothers' weighted gaze.

"I need you to clear your mind," Karamatsu quietly requested, my body slightly shivering from the sudden drop in temperature within the room, "Close your eyes and relax."

I took a breath in and released it slowly as I closed my eyes, following Karamatsu's instructions before finding myself standing alone in a grassy field, the full moon overhead lighting up the flat landscape as the visible stars dotted the night sky. The long grass gently swayed in the light breeze before I heard something swoop over my head, looking up to see a dark shadow flying low in the sky, the moonlight revealing its winged outline.

The shadow landed in the field only a few meters away from me, its form twisting and pulsing before containing itself into a more humanoid shape. The dark hair was swept back and revealed two deep red horns on either side of its head that pointed upwards, complimenting the glowing red eyes as the figure collapsed into its hands and knees, panting heavily as if it had just finished a race. The dark clothing on its body was almost like camouflage in the night, the full moonlight barely revealing the red color in some places.

I moved a little closer and bent down to see the figure's red eyes snap to me, making me freeze in fear.

"You picked a hell of a time to show up..."

The voice was familiar but there was a dark undertone to it, as if two different people were speaking at once.

"I--" I stammered.

"We heard what you've been doing," A younger male voice called out from behind me, making me turn to see two other figures moving closer to the one on the ground. As they came closer, the moonlight exposed their facial features.

Karamatsu and Ichimatsu, clearly younger than when I had just seen them.

I looked back down at the figure on the ground still, seeing the shadow leave his face.

Osomatsu...!

"What rank are you now...Archangels or something?" Osomatsu laughed out, struggling to stand up. He seemed completely exhausted.

"It shouldn't matter to you," Karamatsu spoke as he took a step forward. The field began to hum with some kind of energy, one that told me I shouldn't be between them, "We gave you a warning a while ago."

"Fuck your warning."

The foul language Osomatsu spat out startled me. I've

never

heard him say anything like that before!

Ichimatsu followed Karamatsu's example and approached Osomatsu, holding out his right arm and making a fist. Mist gathered around his closed hand before expanding into a staff, the top curling outward as it hardened into a scythe. Suddenly, Ichimatsu swung the blade down towards Osomatsu, chuffing in annoyance as Osomatsu found the strength to roll away from the weapon.

"You've killed too many people, Satan," Karamatsu held out his hand as a white staff formed in front of him, pure white vines emerging from his hand to twist into a shaft-like shape before sharpening on one end to create a glaive, "Slaughtered too many of ours."

I stumbled back as the two men advanced on the exhausted Osomatsu, struggling to take in the words Karamatsu growled out. Osomatsu...was

Satan

...?

"They're the ones that attacked us first," Osomatsu huffed as he finally stood up on his own two feet, "You need to have a talk with them about engaging us if you want to keep them from dying."

"We told them to meet with you peacefully," Karamatsu raised his glaive before thrusting it towards Osomatsu's chest, the priest staggering back again to avoid the attack, "

You

were the one that attacked without provocation!"

"Hold the fucking phone, you damned Principality!" Osomatsu grabbed the blunt edge of the glaive as it missed him, a sharp sizzling noise emanating from his hand as smoke began to rise, "

I

was minding my business! You cannot put their deaths on me when I

witnessed

them attacking first!"

"Where are Belphegor and Asmodeus?" Ichimatsu asked calmly, leveling the scythe towards Osomatsu's neck, "They are responsible for this, as well."

"They're innocent in this," Osomatsu gritted his teeth and shoved the glaive away, his dual-voice almost a deep growl, "Leave them out of the problem you clearly have with me."

"You slaughter an entire legion of angels, and that's the excuse you come up with?" Karamatsu raised an eyebrow, "How low you have fallen..."

Both Karamatsu and Ichimatsu suddenly rushed forward, their speed faster than any human I've seen, their weapons aimed towards Osomatsu. He

twisted out of the way as his right hand flickered alive with crimson flame, his fingernails growing out and hardening into talons. Throwing the flame towards Karamatsu, Osomatsu backed away again as Ichimatsu closed the distance, angling the scythe in a sharp degree that embedded the blade halfway into the ground when he missed.

I huddled to the ground as the three rushed towards me, attacking and dodging the entire way. Ichimatsu's scythe swung out a few inches above me as Osomatsu jumped away from the weapon again, the three moving past me. My mind was torn between running for my life and figuring out what was going on.

Ichimatsu had mentioned a 'Belphegor' and an 'Asmodeus'...and Karamatsu had called Osomatsu 'Satan'. I vaguely remembered the first two names as belonging within an upper echelon of demons called the 'seven princes of Hell', the books that I had looked through in the library barely referencing them. Was Satan also a part of those ranks?

Osomatsu yelled in pain as Ichimatsu's scythe found its mark, the blade sliding through his left shoulder. Karamatsu closed in quickly, reaching for Osomatsu's throat with his free hand. Osomatsu's eyes burned with a fiery heat before he pulled the scythe out of his shoulder, throwing it in Karamatsu's path before rushing forward, his talons glowing a crimson red again. Distracted by the throw, Karamatsu diverted from his path and was met with Osomatsu's talons, his right hand burying itself deep within his chest.

Ichimatsu didn't waver from the counterattack, using the scythe's momentum to swing in another wide arc and successfully slicing into Osomatsu's right leg as the eldest pushed Karamatsu into the ground. Osomatsu's uninjured leg swept wide and collided with Ichimatsu's waist, pulling his hand out of Karamatsu's chest before pivoting around to fling Ichimatsu away from the fight despite the scythe still embedded in his right leg.

Karamatsu coughed harshly, and I could smell the rich scent of iron in the air. He clutched a hand to his chest as he shakily stood up, clinging to the

glaive and using it as a crutch to lean on. Someone was losing a lot of blood, and I couldn't tell if it was Osomatsu or Karamatsu.

Osomatsu glanced over at him and flicked his right hand downward, flinging his brother's blood off before reaching down and yanking the scythe out of his right calf. The sizzling came back as his hand touched the weapon, groaning as I could hear the metal scrape against bone as the blade was removed from the leg. Ichimatsu recovered from the kick and held out his hand, the scythe flying from Osomatsu's grip and settling into Ichimatsu's outstretched hand.

"I don't have time for this..." Osomatsu stood up as tall as he could, switching his red glare between his two younger brothers, "Your Fallen infestation became our problem, and you want to get rid of us for pointing out your lack of punishment?"

"No...officially, we're here because you've turned your back from God, dealing with demons and siding with them," Karamatsu spat out a glob of blood, breathing heavily as something dark dribbled down his chin, "We just want to know why...as brothers..."

"It's a little late for that kind of sentiment, isn't it? You have no idea what we've been through, what we've seen others go through...and you think that we're just gonna warm back up to you because we're

family

?" Osomatsu hunched over, his talons extending even more as the horns on his head grew a little larger, "No. Fucking. Way."

Osomatsu rushed towards the staggered Karamatsu, the injured brother's free hand pressed against the wound on his chest. Karamatsu didn't move at all, staring down Osomatsu before a loud 'CLANG' rang out as Ichimatsu intercepted the attack with his scythe, his glowing appearance drastically different from before.

Ichimatsu's dark hair had lightened to a very pale lavender color, mimicking the milky white in his eyes. His clothes had shifted from a loose hoodie and

sweatpants to a pure white robe and cloak, the brilliant color catching the moonlight and reflecting it in an ethereal pattern.

But what really caught my attention were his wings.

Two pairs of strong, feathered wings flared from his back, the upper pair larger than the bottom pair. I could see some kind of material mixed in with the feathers, just as bright as his new clothes. He used them as if they were weightless, maneuvering the wings to dodge strikes and parry other hits.

"Heal, Karamatsu..." Ichimatsu's voice had taken on an odd echo, sounding both masculine and feminine at the same time, "He's made it clear that there's no room for discussion."

"But--" Karamatsu moved out of the way as Osomatsu charged him, anger heavy in his red eyes. Karamatsu grunted as he stopped his backward momentum, taking in a small breath before releasing all of the air in his lungs, his form shifting and expanding as I watched.

His dark hair paled into the image I had glimpsed earlier, almost white with a touch of blue as the same color reflected in his eyes. His leather jacket shredded away as two pairs of wings unfurled from underneath, spreading wide before closing behind him. The gaping red wound on his chest swirled shut before it was hidden by a long white wrap twisting around his neck and torso. A simple wave of his hand brought the discarded glaive back into his possession.

"Finally!" Osomatsu yelled out with a laugh, his voice no longer sounding like him at all, "Let's have some fucking fun!"

The tearing of fabric brought my attention to Osomatsu and Ichimatsu, the latter being thrown away by a pulse of crackling, red light. The cassock fluttered around his thin frame as if it was battered by opposing winds, the pellegrina barely holding on by its pin.

I brought both of my arms up to shield my face from the foliage debris that was flying around, taking a few steps back. If this was what happened when they were teenagers...then what would a fight of theirs look like now?

"Let's see what two little Principalities can do against a Prince!" The laughter in Osomatsu's voice chilled me to the core, another violent wind blowing against me and pushing me back a meter or so, the balls of my feet digging into the dirt to try and gain traction against the force.

The unnatural wind suddenly stopped when both sides rushed towards each other, the gusts from the wings creating a strong draft as both Ichimatsu and Karamatsu maneuvered around the wingless Osomatsu, using the air and open field to their advantage.

I could barely keep up with the fight anymore, their movements faster than I could track. One moment, Osomatsu had Ichimatsu pinned to the ground by the throat, and in the next, Karamatsu had Osomatsu tossed into the air.

The grass around me caught the splattered blood from the fight, the visceral spray not even touching me.

Karamatsu screamed in agony as Osomatsu grabbed one of his wings from a block, switching his grip and throwing Karamatsu into the ground, jumping on the downed Principality and pinning him against the dirt. Maniacal laughter erupted from Osomatsu's lips as I heard a large 'pop' followed by the sound of something being ripped apart, the eldest's laughter barely drowned out by Karamatsu's pained screech. One of Karamatsu's larger wings bent at an odd angle before Osomatsu completely raised it above his head in victory, the winged limb fully detached from Karamatsu's back. I could see the ripped skin, torn muscle, and bloody feathers hanging from the shoulder joint from where I stood, my eyes staring in horror as my mind processed what I'd seen and heard.

Somehow pushing past the pain, Karamatsu twisted underneath Osomatsu and caught his neck in the crook of Karamatsu's remaining large wing, using the smaller two for stability as he spun in a circle, throwing Osomatsu off while pulling himself up into a kneeling position. The wing in Osomatsu's grip dissolved into a flurry of feathers, disappearing before they touched the bloody grass.

Osomatsu landed heavily on the ground, rolling to a stop and struggling to stand up before Ichimatsu descended upon his form, a spinning fury of

blade and wings.

It was like a bird of prey mauling its food.

The scythe spun in endless circles as Ichimatsu used his wings to keep Osomatsu within reach of his weapon, despite being pushed back several times by the eldest brother. Somehow using the scythe's momentum, Osomatsu launched himself into the air above Ichimatsu, gathering a large fireball above his head before throwing it down with both arms. The heat from the fireball was tremendous, making the cool night feel like midday in summer.

I heard Karamatsu yell in fury as a burst of blue energy rippled across the field, curving the fireball back at Osomatsu, who barely managed to twist out of the way in midair. A flurry of wings appeared behind him, and a scythe cut upwards through his injured left shoulder completely before he could turn around.

The scream from Osomatsu was primal.

His left arm fell to the ground a little ways away from where he landed roughly, blood spurting from where it used to be before he held his right hand up to smother the exposed wound. His glowing red eyes stared down at his arm in near disbelief before settling on the two brothers across from him, both of them leveling a glare in return despite how damaged they were. Osomatsu's body shuddered as he reached down and picked up his severed arm, looking slightly impressed at the wound.

"Then two is his limit for now..." The deep voice sounded like a pleasant purr, completely disconnected from the pain he should've been in. Both Ichimatsu and Karamatsu tensed up as Osomatsu looked back at them, "It won't happen again."

Osomatsu jammed his severed arm against the exposed shoulder before a ring of fire swallowed the wound, fading into the skin to reveal that the limb had been fully reattached. I stared in disbelief.

"Next time, we'll be fully prepared," Karamatsu growled, his remaining wings slightly puffing out in a threatening posture.

"Please..." Osomatsu raised both arms in a shrug as a smug grin spread across his lips, "You'll need to bring an army to beat me down."

Before either Principality could retort, he vanished in a column of smoke and fire, leaving behind a small circle of burnt grass.

The moonlit field faded from my eyes, falling away to reveal Ichimatsu's apartment...or rather, its ceiling. I felt something wet slide down my left cheek, bringing up my hands and wiping it off, only to see that the wetness was from tears. Pushing myself into a sitting position on the couch, I only looked over to see Karamatsu still sitting down in the folding chair, his gaze sweeping over my form before closing his eyes. Ichimatsu had moved within the room, from the folding chair to lounging on the window sill with one of his cats in his lap.

Sitting in Ichimatsu's place on the folding chair was the smiling man.

The fifth brother.

Jyushimatsu.

Chapter 18

Jyushimatsu sat quietly in the folding chair, his arms crossed over his lap as he looked at me with a wide, toothy smile. The smile didn't meet his eyes.

His dark hues regarded me as if I was someone not worth his time, and I couldn't hold his gaze. It felt heavy, like I was being judged for everything I had done and will do throughout my life.

"You're..." My mouth suddenly felt dry, as if I didn't drink anything for the whole day, "You're Jyushimatsu."

"I am," The smile somehow got wider, "You're (y/n), and you've been the source of a lot of trouble for us."

Karamatsu barely reacted as the words left Jyushimatsu's lips.

"I didn't mean to be," I looked down at my hands, suddenly finding them much more interesting than Jyushimatsu, "I just came back to get my feet underneath me again."

I could feel the pressure on me lift for a moment, allowing me to look up at Jyushimatsu. His eyes were closed and his head was partially tilted back to face the ceiling, a look of serene calm washing over his face before moving to face me.

"Things have been manipulated to send you here much earlier than anticipated," His dark hues locked onto my own, "There is an event coming soon that you don't need to see."

"'Soon'?" The dream from last night resurfaced in my head, "You mean...tomorrow night?"

"...yes."

"You want me to leave because you're going to fight my friends...?" I stood up, clenching my fists in anger at the whole situation, "You're kidding, right?"

"You've seen what they can do, and you know what we are. It shouldn't come to you as a surprise," Jyushimatsu remained calm while looking up at me, "They are demons, after all."

The words rang in my head, a truth that I had tried to deny staring me back in the face. Osomatsu, Todomatsu, and Choromatsu had somehow been possessed by some of the Princes of Hell. Their three other brothers were either angels or possessed by angels in response to that, and in less than twenty-four hours...

They were going to fight each other, and there was nothing that I'd be able to do about it. It wasn't my fight, nor was it really my problem.

I was going to lose my childhood friends.

"Are you sure that they aren't possessed, or anything that could be reversed...?" I looked towards Karamatsu and Ichimatsu, my stomach plummeting when they both turned away from me. If my sibling was possessed by something supernatural, I would do anything in my power to get them back...and who was I to say that they hadn't already tried?

The room remained quiet for a little bit longer, an uncomfortable feeling settling on my shoulders as I looked towards each of the three brothers. I wasn't supposed to be here, and I was dragged into a mess that shouldn't have concerned me.

What else was I supposed to do?

I sat back down on the couch heavily, my hands hiding my face in uncertainty as my brain tried to come up with a solution. A sudden wave of calm swept over me, like I had been through this before and I already knew what I needed to do.

This...feels familiar...

I looked towards the three men in front of me, their faces remaining the same but the clothing they were wearing had changed.

Jyushimatsu was wearing some kind of fancy three-piece outfit, a bright yellow color integrated into the black suit. The smile on his lips had finally met his eyes, and they lit up when we made eye contact, as if instantly gaining an entirely different personality.

Karamatsu had donned a semi-professional outfit, a white buttoned-up shirt partially undone and untucked over a pair of black slacks. His body suddenly bore surgical scars on his exposed chest and arms, his green eyes flicking away from me as if uncertain about something.

Ichimatsu was dressed in a flowing white kimono, the loose layered sleeves hanging off of his arms as the garment was threatening to slip off his shoulders. His dark irises were now colored a sky blue tint that perfectly complemented the bright red markings around and underneath his eyes.

I looked between all three in shock at their sudden change of appearance before looking towards a fourth figure I had missed, leaning up against the back wall with a smile as he unfolded his crossed arms.

His dark eyes seemed to hold amusement for a moment as he realized I was staring at him. The dark, tattered jacket around him fluttered in some kind of unfelt breeze as he raised a finger to his lips, creating a shushing motion. As soon as his finger touched his lips, he vanished into thin air and the three brothers in front of me returned to their normal appearance.

A splitting headache pierced my brain, making me cry out in pain at the sudden onset. My hands grabbed either side of my head, pressing together as if trying to keep my skull from opening as the headache grew worse with each throb. I heard someone walking around the room, but I didn't care. This was worse than when I had looked at Karamatsu the first time...

much

worse.

"Shh...relax your hands," I faintly heard someone whisper to me through the white noise of the migraine, feeling something cool wrap around the back of my neck as the room became dark. The thudding in my head lessened a little as I pulled my hands away, feeling my body shift into a lying position.

"What happened?" Someone quietly asked.

"I'm not sure, but it wasn't anything we did or talked about," Another responded just as silently. I heard a door open before the sound of shuffling feet made me open my eyes slightly, a damp towel draped over my eyes so no light would bother me.

"Then..."

"It's possible."

The door closed before absolute stillness swallowed the room. I didn't hear anything until a hand touched my cheek, making me flinch a little. It wasn't a large hand, but rather feminine and delicate to the touch.

"Rest," The voice was definitely female, "You'll awake in the morning with renewed strength, and knowledge about where you stand in this system."

I didn't have the strength to respond.

Osomatsu rocked on his heels, staring up towards the darkened window with a frown pressing down on his lips. He had told his younger brother that he was going to escort (y/n) from the café to the shelter for her safety, but something felt off about the building. The darkened window only fueled his worries as he felt three of his younger siblings within the building.

Something had happened, and it didn't appear that anyone was going to tell him about it.

Anger flared in his eyes, catching the attention of one of the brothers. An inner door opened to reveal a cautious Karamatsu, looking towards the front door and locking eyes with the eldest brother.

Karamatsu was in front of him in an instant, not even walking through the main entrance.

"Where is (y/n)?" Osomatsu cut him off before he could say anything, "I'm here to bring her back to the shelter after work."

"She's...preoccupied at the moment," Karamatsu held his angry glare, returning it with his own defiant and stern look.

"...what do you mean?" Karamatsu's tone had caught the eldest's curiosity.

"A migraine, as far as we know."

Osomatsu narrowed his eyes. Karamatsu wasn't capable of lying, nor could he bend the truth much. He looked back up to the darkened window, sensing her alone in the room.

"My purpose of being here doesn't change," Osomatsu shifted his eyes back to Karamatsu, "She cannot stay with you."

"Are you that desperate to keep her near you?" Karamatsu raised an eyebrow, "Be careful of your answer, Archdeacon."

"She is part of my congregation, and it is a shepherd's job to keep his flock safe from harm," He rested one of his hands on his hip, holding out the other as if asking for something, "I intend to see my wandering lamb home safe for the night."

"(Y/n) is safe here. She's probably just as safe here as she would be at the shelter," Karamatsu crossed his arms in front of his chest, not budging from his position.

Osomatsu lowered his outstretched arm, letting it hang limply by his side as he studied the second oldest's face. There was a flicker deep within his eyes, as if he was remembering something.

"What happened to (y/n)?" Osomatsu's eyes narrowed and the frown on his face grew.

"A mere migraine, like I told you before."

A few moments of silences passed between the two brothers, neither one backing down from the unspoken challenge that they presented to the other. It wasn't until the front door opened and a soft laugh interrupted them that they looked away from each other.

"Big brother Osomatsu."

"Jyushimatsu," The priest scoffed, "I wasn't sure if you were here or not, but seeing as you are, I have a question for you."

"And what would our big brother want to have validated?" The wide smile on the younger's face didn't hide the smug look in his dark eyes.

"What did you do with (y/n)'s child?"

"The one that wouldn't have survived if he stayed with her?" Jyushimatsu laughed a little, "I gave him to a better mother, that's all."

The silence from Osomatsu was filled with fury, the wind that started to whip around him began to grow hot as he stood there. Jyushimatsu and Karamatsu didn't flinch, only leveling their glares at him. If he picked a fight here...

"I'll notify the shelter that (y/n) won't be coming back tonight," Osomatsu spun on his left heel, walking away from the café, "I do expect her to be back by tomorrow morning, shortly after the shelter opens up."

"She'll be returned safely," Karamatsu spoke as the oldest brother walked into the night, his form illuminated by the city streetlamps. He sighed silently before glancing at Jyushimatsu still standing next to him. The second-youngest had a wide smile on his face, as if he was anticipating a great outcome from an unknown problem.

"After all...in less than twenty-four hours, our problems will be over."

Chapter 19

I turned over in my sleep, feeling the semi-firm mattress shift slightly underneath me as I propped my arms up underneath the pillow I was borrowing, my body feeling comfortable as I stirred from my rest. The small bedside table held my new phone and a folded up piece of paper, catching my attention as the morning sun started to bleed through the curtains.

Yawning while sitting up to stretch, I reached over and snatched the paper from underneath my phone, giving my eyes some time to adjust before opening the note.

'Sleep as long as you want, no work shift today - I'

I read the note a few more times before I fully understood what the note was saying. I was still a part-timer at Cat Garden, so I guess I had Wednesdays off until I was hired as a full-time worker. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I set the note down and lay back on the bed, fully stretching out before relaxing again.

No alarm meant to wake me up, no pressure from doing a morning chore. If I fell back asleep, I'd probably miss breakfast...

My mind thought back to the events from last night, sitting in front of Karamatsu, Ichimatsu, and Jyushimatsu while they warned me to leave and never look back...telling me to abandon my childhood friends who, despite being possessed by demons, have done nothing but help me the entire time I was here. I didn't know if I fully believed it, despite seeing Todomatsu change in front of my eyes, as well as a younger Osomatsu fighting Ichimatsu and Karamatsu.

Getting up and walking towards the pile of folded clothes, I picked out an outfit to wear for the day, slipping on a pair of black jeans and a white long-sleeved shirt that flared out at the elbows and waist. Stuffing my feet into

my worn-out shoes, I pulled my hair back into a favored hairstyle and made my way towards the kitchen, seeing some of the other women set the long table for breakfast. I helped where I could, reconfirming my afternoon chore before sitting at the table while food was being served.

I noticed that Choromatsu hadn't shown up for the morning blessings like he usually did during my stay at the shelter. Putting the dirty dishes in the sink to soak, I headed towards the reading couch before stopping in my tracks. I could feel someone standing right behind me, an uneasy feeling cascading over me as they stared at my back.

It reminded me of what I had felt in Osomatsu's office.

I slowly looked over my shoulder to see empty air, the presence moving with me as I turned. It didn't feel extremely hostile, but I didn't feel safe around it, either. Shoving the relaxing thought of reading out of my mind, I quickly made my way towards the one person that could tell me about it, barely sparing a glance to the receptionist as I left the homeless shelter.

Walking through the twisting hallways of the office building put me in front of Osomatsu's office door, the solid piece of wood closed in front of me as the presence behind me seemed to press me against it, nearly smothering me as I gasped for air. I gave a soft knock before realizing that the door wasn't even closed all the way, my fingers pushing it open slightly to reveal a figure facedown on the ground. Shoving the door open all the way, I rushed into the office with a choked cry, leaving the presence behind me forgotten.

Frantically, I rolled the person onto his back, revealing a weary-looking Osomatsu. His eyes were closed and partially sunken into his face, his cheekbones protruding a little bit. Looking for something for him to drink and frustrated to find nothing on his desk, I pulled him towards me and rested his head on my lap, grabbing a sheet of paper to use as a fan for his face. With him being unconscious, there was no way for me to know what had happened to him.

"Osomatsu...come on, wake up..." I bit my bottom lip, my full attention on Osomatsu as I held his head up. He didn't move for a while, only taking

shallow breaths as if he was asleep. After what felt like forever, the color in his face started to return and his breathing deepened like he was waking up.

I slowed down the fanning as Osomatsu reached up to his face with his right hand, rubbing his eyelids before covering his mouth haphazardly as he gave a wide yawn. He opened his eyes and looked up at me, staying silent for a moment before raising his hand to my head.

"I scared you...didn't I," His apologetic tone matched the concern in his partially opened eyes, the smirk that always seemed to stay on his lips no matter what was going on.

"Yeah...you did..." I couldn't help but smile at his expression, finding myself leaning into his hand on my cheek before pulling away suddenly.

Not now...I can't do this to him now...!

"I must've passed out again," He groaned as he sat up, removing his hand from my cheek and rubbing the back of his head with it, "No sleep for several days in a row will do that to you..."

"Days? You haven't been sleeping for

days

?" I couldn't keep the shock from my voice.

"Haven't really had the chance to. I've been too busy lately."

"Is it...because of what you are?"

Osomatsu seemed to pause for a split-second before standing up fully, adjusting his clothing and turning towards me with an outstretched hand.

"Those of the Heavenly ranks don't require sleep or nourishment, as those are earthly desires..." He drifted off, my mind filling in the blank. Osomatsu, Todomatsu, and Choromatsu still needed rest, just like any other human.

"Why...? Why would you go days without sleep if you need it, Osomatsu?" I took his hand and he pulled me up from the floor, moving to close the office door. As our hands separated, I no longer felt that intense presence behind me.

Osomatsu didn't answer me, his shoulders moving as if he quietly sighed.

"Os--"

"Because of you."

I stilled as his words settled in my ears, watching as he sat down heavily in his office chair. I couldn't be the reason for him driving himself into exhaustion...

"How?"

Osomatsu looked up at me from underneath his fringe, a small smile on his face.

"You've seen so much, and you

still

have questions..." He leaned back a little in the chair, "I don't want you to know everything, (y/n). The consequences of my choices are my burden alone, and the same goes for my brothers."

"No," I took a step forward, "I can't accept that answer. You say that you've lost

days

of sleep because of me, and now you won't tell me

why

? Am I someone that requires some sort of special attention without my knowledge?"

"(Y/n), you're not going to win against me on this," He folded his hands together, leaning forward on the desk as he pressed them to his lips, "

Please

...don't press any further."

"Did you become Satan because of

me

?" I couldn't hold back a partial cry, my throat tightening as the thought dug itself deeper into my head that

I

was the reason for his brothers' suffering...the reason for them turning into demons.

Osomatsu's eyes widened a little before looking off towards the bookcases spread against the wall opposite of his desk, as if looking for answers in their old, worn spines. His stern demeanor faded by the moment, leaving behind a man who was mentally and physically exhausted, his hands dropping from his face as he turned back towards me.

"Yes," The dark hues hardened as they held my shocked gaze, "I had made the deal after I exhausted all of my other options. I had joined the church for my own reasons, but my main driving force was to get you out of that man's grip.

"When I confronted him, I was both pleased and relieved to hear that you were safe, but my anger still wasn't satiated after what my brothers and I had done to him. So I turned my attention elsewhere, focusing on the church and where I was needed. I had busied myself with so much work that I hadn't realized the specifics of the contract I was under until it was too late to revoke it without major consequences.

"We found out that you had moved away after their divorce, and we never wanted you to come back and see us...

like this

..." His voice dipped low in defeat, "What we thought would bring us a small sliver of happiness became our greatest shame."

"So...that's why you guys haven't tried to reach out to me before now?"

Osomatsu only nodded.

"And that's why you're going above and beyond what I ask for now...?"

Another nod.

I raised my hand to my mouth, finally registering what they must've gone through during the years they couldn't talk to me, for fear of rejection when I learned about what they've done to themselves. Guilt sprung up in my gut, my mind fighting off the pervasive thoughts of 'I should've' or 'I shouldn't have'.

"What can I do to make it up to you guys...?"

"I want you to stay in the shelter tonight," Osomatsu's tone took on a more positive note as he spoke, "We're going to be busy with last minute Lent preparations in the cathedral, and some of the more...nasty crowd like to try and cause trouble for us."

Memories of the two men in the alleyway formed in my head, hearing them talk about me like I was food.

"Right...Anything else?"

"Nothing else," Osomatsu smiled, "Just enjoy today. Choromatsu will be free a little later in the morning after Mass, and Todomatsu usually has his evenings open."

"Okay, then I'll stop by after mass, then?" I paused for a moment before speaking again, "Where is his office?"

"Right next to the library. You've been passing it each time you came to see me," The smile widened into a smirk.

"Oh! Then, I'll stop by his office later on," I returned the smile before saying my farewells, closing Osomatsu's office door behind me.

Something picked at the back of my brain, as if I was missing something crucial, but I couldn't think of anything.

Stretching out my legs and arms from the sitting position I'd been in for the last hour, I slowly made my way into the cathedral, watching as assistants began to set up for the service on Sunday while taking down the decorations used in the Mass service. Passing through the annex and into the hallway connecting the cathedral and office building together, I took my time as I passed through, noting that there weren't many people in the office building. In fact, I'd never really noticed anyone else besides the brothers.

Maybe I just wasn't paying attention...

An office door opened ahead of me, drawing my attention as Sister Totoko stepped through the doorway, her attention towards whatever was in the office. There was a slight blush on her cheeks as an embarrassed smile rested on her lips, both remaining as we made eye contact.

"Ah, Ms. (L/n). Father Osomatsu's office is just down the hallway if you wanted to see him," She waved towards the hallway curving around the library.

"I was actually hoping to see Father Choromatsu...is that his office?" I pointed at the door she just walked through.

"It is, and he is in," She stepped aside, holding her arm out as if motioning for me to enter.

I peered in through the doorway to see Choromatsu sitting at his desk, one hand typing away at the keyboard while the other was holding a hand fan.

His attention was on the computer screen facing away from me, the projected light partially reflecting off of his glasses.

"Father Choromatsu, may I enter?"

"Come on in," He pulled his attention from the monitor to look at me, "(Y/n), I wasn't expecting you. Sorry for the mess."

His office was similar to Osomatsu's, though there were a lot more bookshelves in Choromatsu's office. Each bookshelf seemed meticulously arranged in a way that was easy for him to understand, with old and new books intermingling. His desk was the same as Osomatsu's, and I could guess that Todomatsu shared the same desk in his own office, but the major difference between Choromatsu and Osomatsu's offices was the couch. Osomatsu had a full-sized couch that could sit three people (or one person laying down), while Choromatsu had a couch built for two.

I didn't see the mess that Choromatsu was talking about.

"I've seen messier," I lightly laughed before moving towards the loveseat, sitting down on the right cushion before looking at Choromatsu, "I'm actually here because...I want to apologize."

"Apologize?" Choromatsu seemed to be interested in the word, the fanning slowing down a little, "What do you need to apologize for?"

I glanced over at the door, seeing that it was closed before taking a breath.

"Osomatsu told me what happened...what you three did, and I wanted to apologize for it."

There was no verbal reaction from Choromatsu, making me look over at him with slight confusion on my face. I met his eyes, his face set in his usual neutral expression as his hand shifted from the keyboard to lay on the desk.

"As I thought, you have nothing to apologize for," He spoke quietly, "You're not responsible for what you've been through, nor are you responsible for

the decisions we have made of our own volition."

"Maybe so, but I still feel bad..." I looked down at my lap. An uneasy feeling swept over me again, some part of me screaming that I was forgetting something.

"You don't need to put effort into feeling bad or guilty," Choromatsu stood up, pushing his glasses back into place as he walked towards his office door, "I'm sure that we've already told you that you're making things easier for us to bear when you're around. However, if that doesn't settle your guilt, then you can repay us for everything with a simple lunch get-together."

"Lunch?" I stood up from the loveseat, a slight frown pressed on my lips.

"It's just after noon, so yes," Choromatsu looked back towards me as he opened the door, a rare smile on his face, "Lunch."

I found myself sitting at a small table in the church cafeteria, sitting in one of the six chairs encircling the table. In front of me was a sturdy paper plate filled with various foods from the buffet, compliments of the church after Mass every Wednesday for those less fortunate and residents of the homeless shelter. I must've missed it last time...

I shook my head at my inner thoughts. I

did

miss it last time when I wasted the day after being fired by...

Who fired me?

The thought buzzed in my head before I looked down at the food in front of me again, seeing the side salad topped with a light vinaigrette and some sliced veggies, a freshly grilled burger that I had topped with condiments at some point, and some baked beans that smelled of maple sugar and bacon.

I quickly glanced around the room to see that other people were already eating, meaning that I had completely missed the meal blessing. Biting into the burger, a flash of pink caught my eye as someone sat at the table with

me, pulling out the chair across from me. I gave a nod of acknowledgement towards the person, seeing Todomatsu settle into the seat with his own plate.

He looked almost as exhausted as Osomatsu was this morning, dark circles underneath his eyes as he glanced at me. A tired smile settled on his face before taking a bite of food.

"Everything all right, Father Todomatsu?" I asked after swallowing the food in my mouth. He brought up a napkin to his mouth before responding.

"Yes, everything is going well, (y/n). How's the food?"

"I just started. It tastes good so far," I motioned to the single bite in my burger, "I kinda wish I came here last week."

"Is the shelter not feeding you?" He looked slightly concerned, "I'll have to speak wi--"

"No, they are," I interrupted him, "I...was just in a sour mood last Wednesday, that's all."

"Ah, from that attack?" He stabbed a few slices of carrot and tomato with his fork.

"I think...so?" Even as I said the words, they felt wrong. Something else had happened after Todomatsu saved me in the alleyway, but I couldn't remember what happened, "That's weird...I don't remember."

"What don't you remember?" Choromatsu's voice cut in as he sat down to my left, his plate holding two burgers and a little bit of salad.

"Father Choromatsu," I gave a slight nod, my mind trying to think back. What had I forgotten?

"She was commenting on how she wished she came here last week," Todomatsu answered for me, "I don't particularly blame her. The kitchen staff make wonderful food."

"Of course they do. Most of them are volunteers from local restaurants, and all of them are members of the church," Choromatsu stated, "That being said, you should enjoy the food, (y/n). Otherwise, there may not be seconds when you finish."

I laughed a little before focusing on my food, eating through my portion while thinking back to last Wednesday.

I was out for a walk in the morning...no, I was doing a chore for Cat Garden and Takeda when I was ambushed by two guys, Todomatsu saved me and I...

I couldn't think of anything between that and when I woke up the next morning. It was an odd feeling, like there was a gap in my memory when I should've recalled it with ease.

"(Y/n)?"

Choromatsu's voice snapped me out of my daze, blinking a few times before looking at him. The surprised look on my face must've told him what he needed to know: that I hadn't been listening to him speak.

"Father Todomatsu has tonight free, if you'd like to spend some time with him," Choromatsu repeated before finishing the last few bites on his plate, looking towards his younger brother as the priest stood up and cleared his place. I shifted my gaze between both brothers, watching Choromatsu walk away before settling on Todomatsu, his dark eyes watching me.

"The offer is available if you're interested. I know that you've had quite a week so far, so I'd understand if you'd rather relax for the rest of the evening," Todomatsu smiled at me, his hands folding underneath his chin as he leaned forward a little bit.

"I...just feel weird," I put a hand on my forehead, trying to feel if I was overheating from a fever, "I haven't really felt like myself at all today, and the fact that I can't remember things that should seem easy is really bothering me."

"That

is

a little odd," Todomatsu shifted in his seat, "Maybe an afternoon nap would do you some good? If you're mentally exhausted, then you don't need to spend time with me. Your health is more important."

"Maybe..." I lowered my hand, not feeling any additional heat on my skin, "Maybe I'll do that."

I stood up and gathered my plate and cup, throwing them out in the garbage before making my way from the cathedral's cafeteria towards the shelter. I mumbled a silent prayer along the way, wanting this fog in my mind gone.

Without taking off my clothes, I curled on top of the bed, closing my eyes as the fog seemed to cover my entire body, dragging it down into slumber.

I dreamed of nothing. Just a pure-black space that stretched all around me. There was a comforting feeling within the darkness, though, as if it was telling me that I'd be okay.

Groggily opening my eyes, I realized that I had slept until nightfall. The afternoon sun had rushed towards the horizon, casting the sky in a vivid orange glow as the darkness of night swallowed the edges of the evening sky. Crawling over the bed to look at the clock above the door, my breath hitched as the minute hand struck 9 p.m.

I had slept the day away, and I had to--

...

what did I have to do?

'I want you to stay in the shelter tonight,' Osomatsu's voice echoed in my head, the fog suddenly lifting with each word, 'We're going to be busy with last minute Lent preparations in the cathedral, and some of the more...nasty crowd like to try and cause trouble for us.'

It wasn't the two men from the alley that he was talking about.

It was his

brothers

!

How could I have forgotten what I told Osomatsu?! The two days that were talked about in my dream ended

tonight

!

I threw myself off the bed, shoving my feet into my shoes haphazardly and bolted down the stairway, not caring if I startled the other occupants. Twisting the handle of the main door, I paled when the lever refused to turn, barely glancing at the frowning night receptionist to realize that it was after lockdown hours.

I wouldn't be allowed outside.

Sputtering apologies, I made my way back to my room and stood in front of my window. It was a 2-story drop from my window to the alleyway running behind the shelter, and I didn't have enough bedsheets to make a decent escape attempt.

I

had

to stop the brothers from fighting...didn't I?

'But you have nothing to do with it,' A voice laughed inside my head, my inner self making a mockery of me, 'This literally has nothing to do with you. Yeah, you're the reason why the three have demons, but that's it.'

"It's because of me that this is happening. They made their own choice, yes, but I'm not going to stand by as they suffer at each other's hands!" I argued out loud.

'You're not going to be able to find them, even if you did go.'

"There's only three places they could be -- the national park, the farmlands outside of the city, or the forest preserve."

'And what makes you think that they'll be there?'

"Because those are the only places where they can fight and not be seen," I slid open the window locks, pulling it open as wide as it could go.

'So, then...where are you going first, (y/n)?'

Choice Poll Final Closed!

Popular vote goes to...

The national park! A chance to see Osomatsu fighting his counterpart, and who else knows what.

Chapter 20: The National Park (Osomatsu v Jyushimatsu)

'So, then...where are you going first, (y/n)?'

"The national park," I swung a leg out the window, finding purchase on a thin ledge underneath my window before switching my grip and allowing myself to hang from the windowsill. With both feet firmly planted on the ledge, I inched my way over until I couldn't hold onto the windowsill anymore, reaching out to one of the thick water pipes next to my room. Holding my breath as my weight shifted over the meter-wide gap, I clung to the water pipe for dear life, slowly moving my footing over to the cast iron piping joint.

Just a few more meters and I'd be on the ground.

Looking down every few steps, I realized that the pipe didn't lead all the way down to the ground like I originally thought, veering off at a sharp angle back into the building. I'd have to jump down from a meter-and-a-half off of the ground.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I worked my way to hanging off the crook of the pipe with my hands, feeling my feet dangling in the air.

This landing was going to hurt.

Letting my hands relax, I slipped off the pipe and fell to the ground, hitting the ground with both of my feet. The sting from my unprepared feet rocketed up to my hips, the nerves crying out in pain as I fell towards the concrete, my instinct to cushion myself falling just as flat as my body. I breathed in sharply between my teeth as I pushed myself off of the ground, quickly checking to see if I damaged anything and sighing a little as nothing immediately presented itself.

'Get up and go!'

The national park was on the other side of town, almost a twenty-minute run from the shelter, and I don't think I had a lot of time left on my hands. Hopping up and tucking my right leg under me, I took off from a runner's starting position and headed towards the national park, praying that my stamina held up.

I nearly collapsed as I vaulted over the simple barrier arm, stumbling to catch my footing as my lungs worked overtime. I had made it to the park, but now I had to see where they were.

If I remembered the layout of the park correctly, then the biggest open space that was away from street viewing was in the middle, surrounded by picnic areas and thick trees that provided shelter in the harsh daylight. Pushing myself a little further, I started to hear yells in the darkness that were accompanied by occasional flashes of light. Panic sent my body into overdrive, pushing me through the lazy hills and into a flattened plain, running through a thick treeline to see two figures on opposing sides of the field.

I couldn't tell who was who in the darkness, shoving my shirt to my mouth to try and quiet my wheezing and panting as I leaned forward to keep myself up with one arm on my leg.

"You've become quite the thorn in my side, Azrael! It's a shame that you won't get much praise in Heaven for fighting me," I heard a growling voice laugh out, the sound coming from the figure to my left. I remembered the voice from the dream with Karamatsu and Ichimatsu, instantly labeling it as Satan. There was no trace of Osomatsu's voice left.

The other figure remained quiet, standing still.

"No retort?" Satan sounded slightly disappointed, tearing something off and casting it aside while something whirled through the air. Metal clinked together and the figure shifted position, holding some kind of spear, "I

brought out my favorite toy for you to play with, and you have nothing to say about it?"

"You're wasting both of our time," The other figure spoke, sounding male and female at the same time, "Stop this charade."

"'Charade'?" Satan lowered the spear a little, "We haven't even started playing, and you're calling this a '

charade

'?"

He rushed towards the other figure, vanishing in a blaze of crimson fire as the shockwave from the heat and pressure nearly threw me to the ground. Digging my tired feet into the dirt as much as I could, I braced myself as I saw Satan collide with Azrael, hearing the horrible rend of metal on metal as they stilled for a brief moment before a low chuckle sounded. The noise rolled into a loud howl of laughter as Satan staggered back a few steps, Azrael unmoving.

"Inhabiting a human body for so long has made you weak," Azrael commented, "Your host dies tonight, along with the others."

"A Virtue...killing a priest? Wouldn't that make the big man upstairs mad at you?"

"That human has never been a priest."

"Oh...he didn't like that," Satan rolled his shoulders around, a hand reaching up to his neck, "Not that it matters."

'Osomatsu is going to die if you don't do something.'

This was

insane

. This was a fight between a Prince of Hell and a Virtue, one of the higher ranks of heavenly hosts. It's something that I had no chance of surviving...so why was I running

towards

it?!

My legs moved with purpose, the muscles tired and throbbing from the long run but still finding some kind of hidden strength to keep going as I ran towards the two figures, step by step. My heart raced with adrenaline as fear began to creep into my mind. I was a bystander, someone that had no chance of surviving a clash between the two.

But I didn't want to see either brother die because of me.

Closer and closer, each running step pushing me over the low grass, the moonlight now exposing details of the two figures to me.

Azrael's host...was Jyushimatsu. He stood in long white robes that wrapped around his body in multiple layers, the sleeves flowing down to the grass and completely hiding his arms. I could barely see patterns of yellow and gold throughout the fabric as it wound all around his frame, like a child wrapped in a queen-size bedsheet. His neck and lower face were hidden by the folds, the white fabric molded into a wide loop that rose about seventeen centimeters from his shoulders. There were glittering gold markings across his upper face, forming some kind of runic pattern that I didn't understand, swirling around his eyes and streaking across his forehead and the bridge of his nose. Jyushimatsu's eyes moved from Satan to me as I came closer, his pale eyes locking onto mine.

There were no irises or pupils.

"...and right on time," Satan spoke from my left, drawing my attention to him, "The priest's pet."

I couldn't tell where Osomatsu ended and Satan began. The face was the same as Osomatsu's, but the emotion that it displayed was far removed from

what I'd seen him give me. His mouth had completely shed the usual smirk, favoring a wicked sneer that partially revealed slightly sharpened teeth. The dark eyes that once held kindness were now full of rage, the sclera completely black with small glowing pupils of red that seemed to pierce my very soul. His face was marked with burns and red lines that surrounded his left eye, spreading out in a symbol that seemed to mock a dual-halo pierced with spears. The cassock was partially shredded with the pellegrina cast aside and the collar loosened. In his hand was a solid black staff, something that looked to be a mockery of the papal ferula at the top before shifting into a thickened spear towards the bottom...the weapon looking very similar to the glaive that Karamatsu had brought to the fight years ago.

"You know, you're quite cute up close," Satan raised a finger to his chin, leaning in a little as the look in his eyes shifted to a lustful stare, "That's a good look on your face."

His hand reached out towards my head, fingers splayed wide as I was suddenly pulled away, a tight grip wrapping around my left upper arm and yanking me backwards. Flames burst from Satan's fingertips, partially blocked by Azrael's sleeve as he raised it up as a shield between Satan and myself. Quickly taking another step forward, Azrael shifted his arms while letting me go, thrusting both of his hidden hands forward into Satan's chest, sending the Prince sprawling backwards into the treeline across the field.

Standing up slowly, Azrael looked down at me, a neutral look still present on his face. I could only look at him in shock, raising my eyes from where Satan was shoved...or rather, thrown to.

"You are meant to be here."

I couldn't respond, my tongue suddenly heavy in my mouth. I thought I was going to be reprimanded, not expecting the support for my decision. Despite not being able to tell if he was looking at me, I felt his gaze shift from me to somewhere behind my shoulder.

Risking a glance to look behind me, I saw nothing but a moonlit field devoid of human life. I returned my focus to Azrael when there was a sudden chill in the air, seeing him look towards an incoming rolling ball of

fire, the flames igniting the nearby grass as it sped towards us. The heat grew as it came closer and Azrael remained where he was. It grew to feel like the sun on a hot summer's day or a baking oven with the door wide open, my skin crying out for relief as I turned away to feel the heat shift from my face to my back.

Darkness swallowed the field again when the fireball suddenly disappeared, the chill air offering some small comfort against my hot skin. The rustling of fabrics and clashing metal filled the air before a choked cry drew my attention behind me, turning to see Azrael pinning Satan down with his own spear, the blade deep within his chest.

"Oso--! Jyushimatsu, stop!" I yelled as I scrambled to my feet, rushing towards the two beings as panic tripped my tongue to say their hosts' names. Neither of them flinched as I reached for the black spear, the metal coarse and hot against my skin like a burning brand. I cried out in pain as my right palm felt like it was boiling against the shaft, fresh tears blinding me as I tried to pull the spear out of Osomatsu's chest.

The weapon slid out a few centimeters before all resistance vanished, the blade grating against bone and muscle as I tugged it out. The metal shaft felt like it was welding itself to my hand, the pain increasing tenfold as I struggled to open my hand to see the skin bubbling and curling away from the weapon, cracking and tearing off in layers as the spear fell to the ground. I couldn't move my right hand anymore, the muscles quickly shrinking and becoming non-functional, my whimpers spiraling into strained cries as the reality of the wound dug itself into my head. An agonizing scream tore itself from my throat as I clutched my right hand to my chest, cupping it close with my other hand and bending over Osomatsu's body.

"Then you side with him."

Through my tears, I felt an arm wrap around my back and pull me close to someone, the familiar rough fabric soaked with blood. The arm moved upwards towards my head, a hand resting on it before pushing my face into their shoulder.

"You...kill her...and you'll be judged...just as harshly as I..."

My eyes widened as Osomatsu spoke in broken phrases, his voice pushing past the one Satan used. The burn on my right hand screamed in pain as it was flattened between our bodies before the nerves were completely shot and ceased to register anything more.

"She has sided with you."

"(Y/n)'s still human..." Osomatsu coughed out a retort, sitting up as far as he could go. I could hear his wheezing breath dance across my hair, smell the iron of his blood, and somehow knew that he would push himself even further.

I pushed away from Osomatsu, looking into his beaten and bloodied face that was stained with soot and ash. He shifted his eyes back to me, a slight bit of confusion resting in them as I stood up out of his grasp. Turning towards Azrael, I held his blank stare for as long as I could.

"I came here to try and prevent this. You're brothers from the same family, and you shouldn't be fighting each other like this. If you're really an angel, then why can't you forgive him for what he's done?" I motioned down to Osomatsu with my left hand, "Isn't that what the Bible teaches us? To forgive and love one another?"

There was a heavy silence covering the field before anyone spoke or made a noise. Jyushimatsu's shoulders rose a little before lowering back down, his eyes never breaking from mine.

"I will pray for your soul."

Pain flowered in my back and abdomen, my body forced to take a step forward as a black blade emerged from my stomach. The blade continued through until it hit Azrael in his stomach, sinking deep before stopping.

He didn't flinch from the surprise hit.

My face froze in shock as I looked down to see something wet trail down my waist and legs, soaking my shoes and dying my white shirt a dark color, the pole of the spear completely pierced through my core. My hand wrapped around the spear shaft pinning Azrael and I together, something bubbling up in my throat and coating my chin as I tried to cry out. The spear was slick, my fingers not able to find purchase on it to pull it out. A chill began to creep up my body that started at my waist, moving up and down towards my chest and legs.

"Ah, shit," A laugh echoed from behind me, "Sorry about that, babe, but if you want to be with me, you

really

need to lay off that church talk."

It was a mixture of Osomatsu and Satan's voice, the laugh almost sounding just like Osomatsu alone. I tried to turn my head towards him, the chill sweeping up my shoulders as I couldn't move my body anymore.

Osomatsu stood there with a hand scratching his head nonchalantly, the chest wound still pouring blood as he smirked at me.

Smirked

. Slightly tilting his head to the side, he looked down at me with red eyes.

"No hard feelings, (y/n)."

I couldn't believe it. It was

Osomatsu

that had speared through me,

Osomatsu

that used me as a distraction to attack

his own brother

.

The rest of the spear was pulled through me, making me stagger forward and fall flat onto my gouged stomach as Azrael twisted the black spear in his hands, the blood somehow not staining his clothing. He wasn't even bleeding where the spear had plunged into him.

In fact, there wasn't a single wound visible on his body.

I felt wrong. I should be crying out, screaming in pain, or something, but I was silent as my blood spilled from my wound onto the ground. There was a sharp laugh of pleasure above me before the sound of metal clashing filled my ears, the sparks of the fight briefly illuminating the blood-soaked field.

The sounds started to fade as my vision blurred.

"Ah...damn..." I heard someone click their tongue, someone's approaching footsteps crunching against the rocky ground. The ground underneath me felt like gravel against my skin, uncomfortable to lay on. I moved my hands under my shoulders and pushed myself into a kneeling position, taking a moment to look around me.

A dark blue sky stretched above me as black clouds streaked by, like time was passing faster for them compared to everything else. The horizon was unbroken except for someone squatting close to me, their deep black hood and cloak softly fluttering in some unfelt wind.

"I wasn't expecting that to pan out the way it did," He spoke calmly, two green orbs glowing in the shadow of his hood as the wind partially exposed the lower half of his face, "Maybe the next go-through will be more productive."

He stood up and held out a hand towards me, a black fingerless glove covering it. The glove looked well-used, the rough pads of the palm worn

down with age. It felt right to take his hand, so I settled my right hand in his grip and let myself be pulled up. His hand shifted around mine and led me closer to him, walking alongside me as the black clouds flew by overhead.

"Who...are you?" I found the strength to talk, confusion sweeping over me as my hand ghosted over my stomach, searching for a wound that was no longer there.

"You'll remember eventually," The man turned and winked at me before quickly picking me up by my waist and moving me to his other side, "Woop...careful."

A body had materialized where I was walking, the black fabric torn into shreds and soaked in blood. It was a male, laying flat on his back with his eyes looking up at the sky. The clothing he wore sparked something in my memory.

"Osomatsu!" I cried out, trying to run to him but was held back by the other man.

I remembered what happened, the betrayal that occurred. The man on the ground flinched a little and looked over at me, his dark eyes full of sorrow.

"(Y/n)...?" He whispered, my name leaving his lips as a satisfied smile curled them upwards, "Then...I am free..."

"Why?! Why did you do it?" I struggled against the man's arms holding me close to his chest.

Osomatsu closed his eyes as spiked chains, red as a burning flame, burst through the ground around him and wrapped around his body and limbs before diving back into the ground, tethering him down fast.

"He didn't give me any choice, but I'll be paying for it for a long...long time. I'm sorry, (y/n)...I love you."

I screamed in either frustration or anguish...and I didn't know why.

The chains tightened even more, pulling Osomatsu down into the ground, the sharp stones and gravel giving way. He wasn't even fighting against them.

"Stop...Stop it!" I cried out to anyone, falling to my knees as the man fell with me, his head against my back, "Osomatsu, no!"

I screamed as Osomatsu was dragged completely underneath the gravel, a flash of red outlining where he used to be before fading. The man released me from his hold and I crawled over to where I last saw Osomatsu, my fingers digging through the gravel as if I could find him a few inches under the surface.

"Why...?" I looked over my shoulder towards the cloaked man, watching him stand up as his bright green eyes focused on me, "Why did you stop me?"

"You would've been dragged down to Hell with him," He adjusted his shirt and hood, "That's not where you're supposed to go, and I would be in a lot of trouble if I let you do what you wanted before his sentence was carried out."

"You could've saved him in my stead!"

"If I did,

he

would've had a problem with it," He motioned behind me with a wave of his arm, drawing my attention towards a figure off in the distance. It was wrapped in a brilliant shining light, forcing me to look away or risk blinding myself if I stared too long, "Angels don't like it when we mess in their business. Plus, he's kinda my boss right now..."

My heart dropped.

There wasn't a way to save Osomatsu...I was too late, and the damage that I possibly could have helped with happened when I wasn't even around. Tears

fell from my eyes and soaked the ground underneath my dirtied hands, the sobs guttural and full of sorrow. I don't know how long I cried.

When my sobs grew quieter, I looked back to see him extend his hand towards me again with a soft smile spread across his lips.

"Come on, (y/n)...let's get you ready for the next one, okay?"

Placing my hand in his, the man led me away from where I had last seen Osomatsu, each step erasing my memory of what had happened.

Chapter 20: The Forest Preserve (Todomatsu v Ichimatsu)

'So, then...where are you going first, (y/n)?'

"I'm heading to the forest preserve. It's the closest location to me," I slid through the open window, taking in a breath as I looked around for an easy way down. The old cast iron water pipe near my window didn't look like it went all the way to the alleyway, so I tried to find an alternative, my eyes settling on the fire escape ladder a few windows over. It was an old set up, where the extended ladder required weight to lower to the ground, which meant that I'd have to get over there on my own.

Praying that the curtains were closed in the other rooms, I maneuvered my way over from ledge to ledge, tiptoeing where I could as I pressed myself against the warm brick of the building. It was quite a ways down, and I didn't have any special abilities or training to fall from this height safely.

Catching myself a few times, I took in a deep breath as I reached out my left hand, the tips of my fingers barely brushing the ladder. There wasn't a good place for me to get a secure handhold, and I wasn't about to jump onto the rusted cage around the ladder. Quickly looking over my options, I swallowed hard as there wasn't any easy way onto the ladder without going down from the top. Without climbing gear or admitting defeat by going back to my room, I chewed on my bottom lip before settling on hopping the short distance to the cage. If it was stable enough, it could hold me as I pushed the ladder down through the gaps between the bars.

With a hope and a prayer, I stretched out towards the cage before letting go of my grip on the building, feeling myself freefall for a moment before harsh metal brushed against my outstretched hand. Gripping it tightly, I caught onto the metal cage and found as many footholds and handholds as I possibly could, pressing myself against it and taking in deep breaths.

The cage rattled a little with the sudden additional weight on it as I reached through the large gaps, pressing down on the ladder rungs and shouting for joy internally when the ladder extended easily. Keeping my hand on the ladder, I pushed it down further and further until the feet hit concrete, the sound echoing through the alleyway and reverberating through my arm.

Switching off my hands on the ladder, I inched my way down the cage until my feet dangled below it, the toes of my shoes hitting the closest rung. Shifting my weight down further, I maneuvered myself with my hands until I was fully on the fire escape ladder, climbing down as quickly (and safely) as I could.

I didn't know how much time I had wasted just to get down to the ground from my room.

The forest preserve...probably near the picnic field or archery range...

From what I remembered as a kid, there was a dedicated stretch of land for those that wanted to bring picnics for their families, spotted with overhangs and benched tables. The tables were probably removed from the field for the nightlife to roam safely, but I couldn't know for sure until I got there. The archery range was large, but littered with lost arrows that were never cleaned up by the staff. Either place was good for an all-out brawl between two people.

I ran out of the alleyway and towards the forest preserve, observing the signs directing traffic to it. It wasn't too far of a jog before I saw the main entrance sign, chained off to prevent cars from entering afterhours. Holding a breath, I vaulted over the chain barrier and continued through, ducking into the path leading towards the picnic area. Waving off occasional spiderwebs and losing the light from the vanishing sunset, I couldn't hear any odd noises in front of me and exited the path to see a completely vacant stretch of land.

No signs of fighting.

I caught my breath as I looked around the area to reconfirm that no one was there. The tables were put away like I thought they would've been, leaving

the field wide open. Not even a scorch mark was present.

Taking a deep breath, I turned towards the archery range and cut through the foliage again, pushing aside low-hanging branches and dodging around the tree trunks that I could still see in the partial light. With complete darkness threatening to close on me in a few minutes, I forged ahead, feeling nettles and other barbs scrape across my skin.

Breaking through the tree line and running into a thick mesh net, I knew that I had found the beginner archery range. A series of flashes nearly blinded me, colors of purple and pink popping off before the aftershocks cracked in the air. Pulling myself along the net's perimeter, I shook myself free of any greenery that tried to cling to me before stumbling into the archery field.

The beginner's range was right next to the long range, partitioned off with solid metal poles that held up the arrow net that acted as a barrier against loose arrows from new archers. The long intermediate range was lined with moveable targets, from twenty meters to as far as ninety meters, and each target was a foam block with dense layers that were designed to stop arrows from passing right through.

Several targets were shoved aside, with a few more that bore burn marks. A fight had definitely happened here. Catching my breath again, I scanned the area quickly, searching for the source of the lights and explosions.

Instead, it found me.

I was shoved hard to the side and pinned to the ground, a scythe levied in front of my face with a hand pressing down on my left shoulder, my entire right side digging into the damp grass and dirt of the range. A metallic clang sounded off the scythe when it covered my face, followed by a whir as something glanced off and spun high above the edge of the weapon. The trajectory led me to see Ichimatsu frowning heavily at something in the distance, his teeth partially sharpened like an animal's. From what I could see, his body was swallowed in darkness, only appearing as a head and a pair of hands against the night sky. The bottom of his chin and exposed

neck bore old scars, patterned like someone had tried to choke or burn him a long time ago.

"What are you doing here...?" The question didn't sound accusatory, holding a disappointed tone as Ichimatsu glanced down at me. His normally dark eyes had paled to a faint lavender color, the light purple color extending into the skin around his eyes and mimicking an eye mask.

I didn't have time to respond as he shifted his gaze back to whoever was fighting him and rolled to the side, dragging me along as a barrage of metal stakes drove into the ground where we had been. Ichimatsu quickly covered my head with his wide scythe again, clicking his tongue against his cheek in slight annoyance.

"Oh...?" A lilting voice called out, "Do we have a guest interrupting us? How

naughty

of them..."

The voice felt like a finger trailing down my spine, making me shudder uncomfortably as I recognized who it was despite the two tones talking as one.

Todomatsu.

"No matter. I'll deal with them after I finish our little scuffle."

I heard the crack of a gun, echoing off of the treeline and shaking free my memory of the alleyway. Ichimatsu lifted the scythe away from me and spun it in a tight pattern, the blade dancing dangerously close to my head. A horrendous scraping noise raked against my ears, Ichimatsu grunting a little as he shifted backwards. I looked up in horror as a metal rod protruded from his right shoulder, gleaming in the faint moonlight as the celestial body began to rise in the night sky. He staggered to a standing position, deftly moving the large scythe between his hands before a chunk of metal landed next to me.

Ichimatsu had cut off the rod that was protruding from his shoulder, leaving some of it still embedded in his body.

"Well, if it isn't (y/n)."

I heard Todomatsu's voice much closer than before, shifting my gaze over to see the priest calmly walking towards us from the other side of the range. The moonlight revealed his curled horns and was reflected within the bright glowing eyes of red, though the color seemed closer to pink as he stalked towards me. The cassock was cut and tattered in various places, partially revealing his pants underneath and some markings along his arms.

"Todomatsu..." I rolled into a sitting position and moved backwards, trying to distance myself from him. The feeling I was getting from him screamed to escape, to not be here.

"Oh, my little (y/n)," His voice fully rolled into one that I didn't recognize, "I would feel offended, but we've never met face-to-face...so it's okay that you don't know me."

"Asmodeus, enough," Ichimatsu swung his scythe between us, drawing our attention to him, "I won't let you play your games with her."

"Because you're her boss, or because you actually

like

her?" Asmodeus pulled something out from behind him, the long metallic barrel catching some of the pale moonlight. I had partially seen it before, thinking that it was some sort of human weapon.

This definitely wasn't man-made.

The muzzle of the weapon caught my eye first. Instead of a round muzzle like a normal gun, it was a gaping fanged mouth of a skull. The eyes of the skull were carved out of something that looked to be pink topaz and resting between two horns that looked like Todomatsu's own pair, the empty gems staring at whatever the weapon was pointed at. Behind the pale fangs of the

muzzle, the skull elongated into a thick barrel with a swollen glowing sack of pink resting underneath it, mimicking a throat. His left hand held the carrying handle easily, making the entire weapon look nearly weightless despite it being just as long as his body.

"Neither," Ichimatsu's voice shifted into two pitches, one sounding like himself and the other sounding more female. The air slightly swirled around him, ruffling our clothes as he widened his stance and held his scythe with both hands. I could feel my skin begin to prickle, as if I was standing in an electrical storm, but I didn't feel like I was in danger of being struck.

"Oh, please," Todomatsu rested his free hand on his hip, raising an eyebrow as a knowing look settled on his face, "I know what you really think about her. You can't hide my sin from me, Uriel..."

He was cut off by one of the metal stakes, catching it before it impaled his face. Todomatsu's eyebrow twitched as he moved the stake down from his face, bringing it to his lips and licking the length of it, meeting and holding my horrified gaze as a smirk curled the corner of his lips upwards.

"Such an impatient Virtue, isn't he?"

"That won't work on me, Asmodeus..." Ichimatsu growled, taking a few steps forward and pointing his scythe at the priest. Todomatsu kissed the stake before looking towards Ichimatsu, tossing it aside and shrugging.

"It wasn't aimed at

you

, Uriel."

"Why are you doing this?" I stood up, facing Asmodeus and barely coming to terms with the fact that Todomatsu wasn't the man I was talking to. Todomatsu was probably nothing more than a host for this...Prince of Hell, "Why can't you just leave them alone?"

"'Why'?" Asmodeus scoffed, "You ask 'why' like you have a right to. I should be thanking you, if I'm honest with myself...Because of you, my brethren and I get to walk the earth once more," He splayed his fingers wide as he pressed his free hand against his chest, "I would give you more of a reward if that stuck-up holy ass-kisser wasn't next to you. You can come here, and I'll give it to you."

Uriel launched from his position, swinging the scythe wide in a low arch, the wake of his lunge hitting me like a torrent of wind. Asmodeus laughed at the sudden attack, shifting the barrel of the weapon over and blocking the first strike of the scythe, raising it to parry another before brandishing the large weapon and aiming it towards Uriel. Flames began to seep out of the weapon, soon swallowing Asmodeus as his right hand activated some kind of trigger, unleashing a short burst of gunfire. Sharpened metal stakes were expelled from the mouth-shaped muzzle, streaking towards Uriel carrying some of the fire with them and illuminating their path in the night sky.

Uriel dodged around them, knocking them into the ground with his scythe as they passed, gathering speed as the whirls became faster and faster, creating a metallic hum as the weapon swirled around him. With a final twist of a wrist, Uriel sent the scythe flying out towards Asmodeus, forcing him to jump away as the spinning scythe arched in wide paths.

The gap was widening between the fight and myself.

The fight between the teenage brothers came to mind, the current Ichimatsu much slower and more deliberate with each action than when he was a teenager. Instead of a whirlwind of feathers and blade, he watched Asmodeus carefully, countering whatever came his way before striking out. Each hit was like a test to see how strong the opposing defense was, both combatants poking and prodding each other before one decided to escalate the fight.

Gunfire and blade rang out in the range, the fight slowly pressing in as I carefully moved away. Asmodeus was a Prince of Hell, a representation of the deadly sin called lust...and Uriel was his direct opposite. If they decided to fight seriously, I didn't want to be around when the first blow landed. I

don't think any of the fights between the brothers would be something I'd survive if I interfered.

"You're boring me, Uriel," Asmodeus called out with a yawn. I felt a swell of hot air surround me before a warm gloved hand cupped my right cheek, guiding my head to look upwards and to the left. My cry of shock was smothered as Todomatsu's lips pressed against mine, the skin dry and cracked as if exposed to the sun for too long. His hooded eyes looked down at me in amusement, the reddish-pink glow dim as my own colored hues could only stare back into them. Warm metal pressed against my front, pinning me between the demon-gun and Todomatsu's body.

I fought to keep myself from blushing, the heated feelings from before bubbling up unbeckoned as he kissed at my lips hungrily. A sudden soft moan escaped my throat as his hand shifted from my cheek to my exposed collarbone, the fabric of his glove sliding against my skin as his fingers slipped underneath the neckline of the shirt. Humming a laugh into the kiss, he opened his mouth and parted my lips with his own, shoving his tongue into my mouth.

Squirming in any direction that wasn't against him, my mind remembered that I still had the use of my hands, pushing his wandering hand off of me while trying to find a way to escape. I could feel him smile against my lips, pulling the weapon away from me and holding it out with a steady arm, his eyes shifting from me to the incoming Uriel. Asmodeus broke the kiss before I could get away, a wicked grin planted on his face as he licked his lips, the glow in his eyes growing stronger.

"Sorry, I had to take a quick meal break," His wandering hand clamped down on my left wrist, roughly pulling it away from him and shoving me to the ground next to him. I felt drained, as if I had just finished a long day of physical labor. My body trembled with exhaustion as I tried to stand back up.

Asmodeus didn't need to force me down in place; I couldn't even move a finger.

There was no response from Uriel, but I could see the slight pause in his movements. His figure shimmered slightly before vanishing completely, a deep clap of air resounding at his disappearance before I felt a strong blast of wind hit me, almost as violent as a hurricane wind. My ears pounded at the sudden change in pressure, my heartbeat thundering more loudly than the wind for a brief moment.

I heard Asmodeus scream next to me, unable to look up to see what happened. A string of swears sputtered from his mouth as I heard his footsteps stumble backwards, slightly flinching as a soft hand brushed itself against my exposed left cheek. As the hand pulled away, my body stopped screaming for rest as muscles began to relax, allowing me to move again. I propped myself up with my hands and looked towards Uriel, seeing him return the gaze with a soft emotion in his eyes.

"Argh!" Asmodeus yelled in frustration, "You pin-feathered asskisser! My first good feed in months, and you take it away from me!"

Twisting to look behind me, my eyes widened as I saw a broken Asmodeus stumble forward through the treeline. His right shoulder and arm were nearly severed from the body, barely hanging on by whatever unnatural force or muscle he had. It was a completely clean cut, starting next to the neck and ending near his waist.

I could see exposed bone and organs threatening to fall out from their fleshy prison, turning away and pressing a hand to my mouth to try and not vomit or retch. Blood had completely covered the area, the arterial spray lessening as the body began to run out of the life-providing liquid.

"You have no right to touch her," Uriel spoke in a calm manner, as if he hadn't just killed the man.

"She didn't taste that good, anyway," I heard a squelch as he grunted, barely glancing back to see him nonchalantly pull his right shoulder back up into place. Fire flared from the wound, a searing sound rising as the blood stopped flowing. His right fingers flexed before stretching out the arm, somehow successfully reattaching the severed limb, "She did have quite a

crush on my host, though. The eldest would've gotten a bigger boost if he were I."

Rolling his right shoulder, the flames sputtered out to reveal a large scar where the cut had been previously. Asmodeus caught my stare and stuck his tongue out towards me, his eyelids partially closing as he tilted his head to the side.

"Mind if I take another drink, sweetie?"

"No..." I couldn't stop my voice from shaking, "You can't...!"

"Too bad that yo--

shit

!" Asmodeus cut himself off and raised his weapon, blocking the incoming scythe swing as Uriel pressed forward in a relentless attack. Withdrawing and changing directions, the scythe hummed in the air as it passed between Ichimatsu's hands deftly despite each strike colliding with the large gun Asmodeus wielded. Sparks flew with each hit, the grating metal screeching in the silent night.

"No more," Uriel growled, more of Ichimatsu's voice slipping through as the feminine echo started to fade. His dark hair began to turn pale under the moonlight, the dark patterns around his eyes shifting on his skin. The solid color thinned out into lines that curved around each eye, creating runes in a language I didn't know or understand as the shapes' color deepened into a royal purple with some hints of gold underneath it, almost creating an outline of whatever the runes were. The black clothing brightened into a brilliant purple fading to gold on the edge of the fabric, twisting around his body as it shifted from a cloak of darkness to a billowing robe. It never seemed to drift far away from his body, as if held there by some invisible force.

"Oh,

now

you get serious?" Asmodeus groaned, blocking another advance before stepping underneath the scythe's range, quickly closing the distance to Uriel as he swung wide with his own weapon. The gun smashed against Uriel's left side, the follow-through sending him careened off towards the metal audience stands for the range. I could only stare in horror as the stands crumpled inward, the metal partially pinning down the Virtue in place as I heard a heavy sigh next to me.

"What have you done...?" I clenched my fists tightly as I kept watching Ichimatsu's body for movement.

"It's been

so

long since I've gone 'all out', I almost forgot what it felt like," A warm arm draped over my shoulders, the thumb rubbing circles along my right bicep, "Or it could've been our kiss. Not sure which -- don't really care."

"You're his

brother

, Todomatsu!" I spun out from under his arm, glaring at Asmodeus with everything I could, "Family isn't supposed to kill each other."

"Listen, sweetheart," Asmodeus leaned forward a little, putting some weight on his weapon as a substitution for my shoulders, "Just because your family was all smiles and sunshine doesn't mean everyone's family is fucking picture perfect. Sometimes, the water of the womb isn't that thick."

"My 'family' wasn't perfect, you damn demon!" I resisted the urge to slap Asmodeus in his smug face, "My foster father molested me, and my foster mother abandoned me when I turned sixteen!"

"Oh, poor baby girl," He took on a mocking tone, "What are you ever going to do? It's not like we did you any favors or anything."

A small look of feigned surprise settled on Asmodeus' face before he leveled a knowing smile at me.

"Oh, wait...yes, we did."

My waist twisted, adding weight to the hand striking Asmodeus across his face as the snap of skin cracked the silence. I held a breath, slightly wincing in pain as a warm yet numb sensation swelled in my fingers, glaring at Asmodeus with his head turned to the side, his left cheek turning into a darker shade in the moonlight.

A slight scoff bubbled from his throat, disbelief written on his face as he slowly turned back to meet my glare, a coy smile spread wide on his lips.

"Where was this side of you when you came back?" He raised a hand and massaged his raised cheek, "Fuck, you're making it so hard to not

kill

you right now."

"Then why don't you?" I rubbed my numbed hand against the other, trying to get rid of the tingling feeling without breaking eye contact.

"You're not mine to kill, and I

really

like this body."

I could only take that as one of the other Princes would not be too happy if Asmodeus erased me, so I tried to breathe a little easier knowing that I wasn't under immediate threat of death. If I pushed too far, then...

"Then whose target am I?"

"Do you really want to know, or are you just buying time for Uriel to recover?" He looked behind me for a moment before lifting the weapon up

and shouldering it over his frame, walking closer before gripping my chin tightly, "The one you call Osomatsu."

I froze as he let go of my chin, allowing him to walk past me towards Uriel.

Demons were known for lying and tricking people...so this was a lie, right? It

had

to be! Osomatsu has been nothing but kind and understanding about my situation, helping out where he could and asking to do more. I couldn't see him killing me, even if he was possessed by Satan. There was no way!

"...you're lying..." My voice was quiet, even to my own ears.

The sound of a round being chambered echoed behind me.

"You're lying...!" I felt my throat shudder even as the words left my lips, turning to face Asmodeus lowering the muzzle of his weapon to Uriel's chest, the Virtue still unresponsive. Reaching around the barrel of the gun, I pushed it aside with my body weight, glaring up at Asmodeus, "You're lying!"

"Babe, you screaming to the ends of the earth that I'm a liar doesn't change the fact that Osomatsu will spear you the moment you become useless to him," Asmodeus rolled his eyes and rested his free hand on his hip, "I didn't think that your crush was big enough to blind you to the signs he's been showing since you stepped through that church's door. Would've claimed you in the confessional booth, too, if he didn't threaten me..."

"You're saying...that Osomatsu

knew

about me? About me being thrown out?" My heart plummeted to my feet, leaving a gaping hole that struggled to find some other way to spin his words so that it didn't hurt.

"It was Satan's plan from the beginning, knowing how close you were to the boys and how it would push them right into his hands," He paused before leaning towards me, "You

really

had no idea?"

I lightly shook my head, unsure of what to feel or how to express it.

"Fuck me sideways!" Asmodeus laughed for a little bit, "You were played your whole life! Had your boyfriend possessed by a lower rank and impregnated you with a kid when you were far enough away from your faith, supposed to be born as the son of Satan when he had you deep in his clutches."

He poked my stomach for emphasis, the force rocking my body back a little.

"The plan was great: force you to leave safety when the baby was hidden enough so you couldn't get rid of it, planted memories of your childhood so you'd come back here. Oh, it was almost a work of art!" Asmodeus' smile faded, "But then you met Gabriel by coincidence, and he took you under his wing faster than we could counter. Damned feather-brain put you under their protection, and fucking

Azrael

ripped the seed from you!"

The memory of the alleyway surfaced in my mind, remembering the intense pain in my stomach and passing out only to wake up in Karamatsu's home.

"We knew what you were trying to do...what you had already done to them."

The familiar voice brought my attention behind me, turning to see Uriel push away the torn metal acting as a cage around his body. In one swift motion, I felt myself floating in the air for a moment before I realized that I

had been picked up by Uriel, my entire weight completely supported by one of his arms.

"That's two finished," Uriel took in a slow breath, "All that's left...is you."

"You've got quite an uphill battle, Uri," Asmodeus shrugged as he held the gun up, the muzzle aimed at Uriel, "From what I can see, you don't have much time left in that vessel and you're definitely not the strongest fighter here."

Ichimatsu...?

Uriel remained silent before looking towards me. The lines covering his face were slightly faded, retaining their strong purple color despite the design slowly vanishing around the edges of his face. Ichimatsu's dark eyes had turned into bright golden hues, making brief eye contact before setting me down on the ground.

"Run to Azrael," Straightening once again, Uriel pushed me away slightly, "He will help you."

"(Y/n)'s not going anywhere! I will finish the plan Satan started!" Asmodeus shifted his weapon towards me and several cracks ricocheted off of the treeline, Uriel rushing forward and bringing the scythe up from deep within his robes, the metal stakes bouncing away from the scythe. I stumbled backwards as the Virtue and Prince of Hell collided, shockwaves ripping across the archery range and shoving everything away from them, even snapping some of the trees closest to them. Dirt and grass were thrown around by the shockwaves, pelting me in the face and making me turn away so I wouldn't be blinded by the debris.

There was barely any air to breath, with the pressure around the fight growing heavier and heavier. Sucking in whatever air I could, I tried to stay conscious as I moved away from the fight and clung to a nearby tree that was partially covered by the arrow net of the beginner range. The net itself shook from the pressure waves and I slid down the back of the tree, gasping for air as wave after wave of pressure hit my shelter. I couldn't hear

anything besides the air rushing around me, though I swore I could've heard shouts at some points.

The fight felt like it lasted forever, though it could've been as short as a few minutes. The end was just as sudden as the start, filling the range with complete silence.

I didn't want to look from behind the tree. I didn't want to see Ichimatsu pierced and nailed to a tree or the ground. I didn't want to see Todomatsu, one of my childhood friends, dismembered and strewn about the field. There were a lot of things that I didn't want, but the continuing silence made it clear that there wasn't any fighting.

Holding my breath, I slowly leaned out from my hiding place, wishing desperately to not see a dead body on the field.

Kneeling on the ground was Todomatsu, and laying motionless before him was...Ichimatsu.

Asmodeus had won.

Todomatsu made no move to get up or lay down, simply letting his body kneel in a resting position. His cassock was completely tattered from the fight, some parts seared off while the main body of the cassock was shredded, as if it was pulled apart by desperate hands. The dark hair was singed from where the horns were, ruffled up and tossed about like he hadn't brushed it from the previous day. His eyes were peacefully closed.

I let him rest while moving to look over Ichimatsu, keeping my distance as I took note of his appearance.

Ichimatsu was sprawled out on the ground, as if he had let his body fall after a hard day of work, his arms positioned above his head and nearly spread-eagle. His chest lightly rose in a breathing pattern, my discovery turning into a small amount of joy at the realization that Asmodeus hadn't won completely. Ichimatsu was clad in his normal attire, the loose long sleeve shirt torn and shredded in the arms and shoulders while the sweatpants were roughed up and ripped in random places.

"Ichimatsu...?" Cautiously moving towards him, I flinched a little as his eyes opened and looked towards me.

"...(y/n)..." He raised his head a little before lowering it back down with a groan, "...hurts too much to move..."

"What happened to Uriel?" I knelt next to his head, looking down at him as the moonlight cascaded onto the field.

"Gone...job was done."

"...just like that?"

"Too many questions..."

I muttered an apology before falling into silence. If Uriel had left, then did that mean...Asmodeus was gone?

If so, then what about Todomatsu?

"...he's gone," came the choked reply to my unspoken thought. My eyes snapped down to Ichimatsu as he covered his face with his hands, "I killed my youngest brother...! I didn't want to!"

His voice broke more and more with each word, a shuddering breath echoing with a growing cry until he couldn't utter any more words clearly, yelling out in frustration and sadness.

Gently but quickly, I reached down and held him close to me, gripping him in a tight embrace as he let me hold him, his hands grabbing onto the back of my shirt and holding on tightly. I didn't move any further, feeling his desperation as he shifted his grip about on my back, each hand pressing me close to him to feel some kind of physical touch. His yells died down into sobs filled with grief, his chest trembling in my arms as I kept holding him, my heart echoing his sorrow. Tears fell down my cheeks as I looked towards Todomatsu's body, grief wrapping itself around me like a heavy coat.

I couldn't remember how long we stayed there, just clinging to each other for moral and physical support until the sun started to rise, the light creeping through the trees as the sky reflected the early morning light with shades of pink.

Chapter 20: The Farmlands (Choromatsu v Karamatsu)

'So, then...where are you going first, (y/n)?'

"I don't know..." I hesitated a little, turning towards the door to my room as ideas of how to leave flooded my head. I could get out via the window, use the building to climb down to the street. I could try going through the kitchen door that was used for deliveries...though, the window would be much faster.

I didn't have a lot of time to waste wondering what my next move would be.

Taking in a deep breath, I stormed back to the open window, leaning out and looking for a safe way down. Nothing that I saw seemed to be a safe option, feeling myself grew more and more uncertain about climbing down from my window. What if I got hurt from landing wrong, or cut myself badly from a fall?

Why was I hesitating...?

I pushed myself out the window and grabbed onto the ledge, breaking through the weird fog that had settled in my mind. I shouldn't be uncertain about this -- I was going to try to save my friends and their brothers.

The old cast iron water pipes nearby would suffice for a way down.

Reaching the edge of the window ledge, I stretched out my right arm as far as it would go, feeling the old metal brush against the pads of my fingertips. Kicking my legs gently from side to side, I was able to reach a little further with the momentum, grasping one of the joints in the piping before taking a deep breath to calm down. The metal hurt to hold onto, but I clung to it like a lifeline as I released my left hand from the window ledge.

I miscalculated.

The joint was too weak to support me, falling loose as my body dropped suddenly towards the concrete. The piping groaned as a section of it fell with me, the joint still held by my hand.

I didn't have time to try to land on my feet, my voice locked up as I saw the concrete rush up to greet me.

I felt a pair of hands grab at my shirt, twisting me around and pulling me upwards slightly, the motion slowing my fall as the piping careened towards the ground beneath me. The hands shifted their grip and released me when I was only a few feet above the concrete, allowing me to land safely.

I could only blink for a moment before looking around for the person that helped me, only to see no one.

"Thank you," I called out to whoever it was, offering a silent prayer of thanks before heading out of the alley and turned towards the outskirts of the city.

The farmlands weren't completely surrounding the city, but they stretched out to the southwest. I had passed through them to get back here, walking the entire way without much pause. I remember it taking hours to get through them.

I could only hope that the brothers would be close by.

Running through the suburban areas, I saw darkness envelop the landscape beyond the sparsely built houses, the sidewalk ending at the last house and letting the road continue on alone into the dark night. It seemed like another world.

I slowed my pace as the sidewalk ended, catching my breath and walking on the empty road. It had taken about ten minutes to get here from the shelter, and I kept an eye out for anything that looked like a fight. Silence thundered against my ears as the city noises fell away behind me, making my way deeper into the dark farmlands.

A noise that sounded like a shout caught my ear, coming from somewhere to my right. I stilled and waited for another noise to confirm the direction, being rewarded with a scream from the same area. I couldn't imagine any of the brothers crying out in that high of a pitch, the scream almost sounding like a female. I slowed as my feet hit grooved dirt, knowing that I was walking through tilled earth and probably through someone's growing crop.

"Gabriel,

stop

!"

Gabriel...one of the named angels from the Bible! It had to be the fight, right?

I headed towards the sounds, seeing flashes of white and orange collide in the distance that momentarily revealed two figures, both of them possibly fighting each other. The closer I went to the fight, the more I felt uneasy about where I was going.

Which one was Gabriel, and who was he fighting? The only names that I've heard from the brothers were the Princes of Hell, and from what I had read...none of the Princes were female.

The area began to grow brighter as the moon became fully exposed from the previous cloud cover, revealing someone pinning someone else down to the dirt, a hand raised as if to strike them.

"I gave you a chance to leave."

A male voice intertwined with a feminine voice.

"I had work to do, and I'm not finished!" The pure female voice cried out, "I only have one more task before I am able to go back, so just let me finish it, Gabriel!"

"You've meddled for long enough," Gabriel spoke calmly, "Go back. Everything is ending tonight, and you have nothing further to do here."

"No! I have more dreams to give, more visions to sen--" The female was cut off, choking and coughing as it sounded like pressure was added to her throat.

"You have meddled for long enough!" Gabriel reiterated, his voice growing tense, "She was not meant to see, and you've Fallen from the ranks. Go back before you can't atone for your deeds."

I stopped moving towards them, seeing both figures dressed in light robes. I couldn't mistake them from this distance.

The woman who had been with Jyushimatsu...and Karamatsu.

Karamatsu is the host of...Gabriel?

He released his grip on her throat and stood up, his gaze fixed on her form as she struggled to stand up in front of him. She staggered back as her face changed from neutral to a look of fear, her eyes never leaving Karamatsu's face. I couldn't see anything that changed about him, but I was only human; I only saw what they wanted me to see. I'd probably be blinded for life if I saw a Virtue's true form.

In the blink of an eye, the woman vanished from sight. Karamatsu took in a slow breath before looking over at me. I couldn't help but look away.

His normally dark eyes were glowing gold, as if illuminated from within. The jeans and leather jacket were replaced with a pale red robe and cloak, some kind of chest piece armor partially hidden underneath the cloak that parted as he walked towards me.

"(Y/n)," I shuddered at my own name, "You're not supposed to be here."

"I..." I felt my mouth dry in fear, "I wanted to try and stop you from fighting your brothers..."

He remained silent as he stopped in front of me. I could feel an overwhelming emotion ebb from him, a mix of sadness and understanding.

Karamatsu took in a slow breath before lifting one of his hands, the motion making me flinch a little.

"If you stay, I cannot guarantee that you'll be safe."

"Whatever happened to 'do not be afraid'?" A voice drawled from behind me, startling me into turning around to see Choromatsu standing not even a meter away from us. The moonlight caught the green-accents on his cassock and reflected a little off of his glasses, "That used to be your trademark saying, right?"

"Belphegor," Karamatsu stated.

"Gabriel," Choromatsu slightly tilted his head in acknowledgement of his name. Belphegor, the Prince of Hell who was representative of sloth, and Gabriel...his exact opposite, the Virtue representing diligence.

I had no place standing between them.

"(Y/n) seemed to be very good at running into you, so I just let her lead the way," Belphegor shrugged a little, the hidden briefcase now revealed in his hand. I remembered him carrying it when I was getting a check up a few days ago.

"That would be something you'd do," Gabriel didn't sound amused, "So, tell me...are the others preoccupied?"

"You know that answer just as well as I do, Gab."

"Do not shorten my name."

Belphegor shrugged again, adjusting his glasses as the wind picked up around us.

"Let's just get this started, shall we?"

I stepped back in horror as green horns crawled out from underneath Choromatsu's hair, sweeping backwards before angling up towards the sky. His eyes started to glow a crimson red, the irises narrowing as he stalked

forward, nearly pinning me between both of them with barely any room to move or escape. The air grew thick around me, as if the humidity had spiked in the area to nearly ninety-percent, making it hard to breathe.

Fear kept me still, not wanting to grab either man's attention as they stared each other down. My muscles became tense and my legs sent warnings that they were gonna collapse if I stayed frozen much longer. Adrenaline and instinct told them to shut up.

I couldn't see if they were doing anything, but the ferocity of the wind around us told me that something was happening. The thick air refused to leave, despite being pushed around by the wind, driving my lungs to work nearly overtime just to get a decent breath of air in.

In a sudden movement, Belphegor narrowed his eyes and backed off, jumping a few meters away from Gabriel, his briefcase opening on its own and swarms of loose papers flying out of it, scattering around the area as the winds carried them. A heavy hand pressed down on my left shoulder before dragging me backwards, roughly pushing me behind Gabriel as he tossed his cloak over his shoulder. I staggered backwards on the uneven ground, trying to regain my balance when I noticed the papers start moving around, lines of red forming some sort of design on them before they ignited and flew towards Gabriel.

With a wave of his arm, the wind shifted and intercepted the flaming papers, sending them back towards Belphegor. The Prince swung the briefcase and deflected the papers, snapping his fingers together and igniting the rest scattered around Gabriel. The flaming sheets danced around Gabriel and I, spinning closer in a tight circle until I was pressed against Gabriel's back, the fire only centimeters away from me. The heat from them was unbearably hot, each sheet feeling like a forge furnace as they came closer to my skin.

Suddenly, some of the sheets clung to my shirt, burning off the material and searing my skin. Two sheets stuck to my waist and left shoulder, igniting the sleeve. I ripped it off before it could do more damage, using the fabric to swat away the papers on my body.

"You'd better do something about that, or you're going to lose her, Gab," Belphegor yawned, "Your host is human, too."

I couldn't hear Gabriel's reply, if he even answered at all, with my inner voice screaming at me to run through the fire and get out. There was much worse to lose than a shirt here.

Before I could duck through the fire, I felt someone's arms wrap around my waist moments before a rising feeling ripped through my stomach, as if I was ascending a steep hill at a fast rate. I clung to whatever I could hold onto, feeling the wind rush by me and the air become breathable again. Risking a look, I could see darkness beneath me, a small circle illuminated by the papers and revealing Choromatsu standing in the dark.

"Hold tight," Gabriel barely commanded, several wingbeats sounding as one. I could see five wingtips hold us aloft, each wing beating strong in near unison as they curled around his shoulders. Three wings folded out from his right side while two on the left worked hard to keep up with the others.

He was missing a wing...!

My thoughts drifted towards the scene I saw play out, with Osomatsu tearing out one of Karamatsu's wings. I thought it would've grown back after all this time. I pressed my forehead against the chestplate, feeling overwhelming sorrow at the incomplete Virtue, forever scarred by someone that I held dear.

I felt a shift in posture as Gabriel dropped a little altitude, rolling away from a flaming stack of papers thrown up towards us. The stack widened, thinning out as the papers swarmed around us again, accelerating as they streaked towards us. I clung tightly to Gabriel's robe as he tilted and rolled to avoid being hit, performing dizzying acrobatics and confusing my sense of equilibrium. We swooped close to the ground and I felt my grip being loosened before landing hard on the soil, rolling to a stop as Gabriel picked up speed overhead.

I stopped in time to see Gabriel close his wings around him and spin into a human bullet, his momentum carrying him right into Belphegor. Sparks flew out and over Gabriel as Belphegor blocked him with the simple briefcase, pushing the pair back a ways before the Virtue slowed enough to pull back and land.

"You remember the last time you showed those overgrown things, right?" Belphegor straightened out his glasses and his cassock, brushing off some dirt that had been kicked up. Gabriel remained silent as his wings tucked in behind him.

In the moonlight, I could see that each pair was a different size. The large wing had swelled a little in size since the last fight, as well as the middle pair. The bottom pair was smaller than the other two, but still longer than my height when fully extended.

"For an attack from you, that was pretty pathetic. Did (y/n) weigh you down, or did Homura take up too much energy from you?" Belphegor brushed some of his fringe aside, slightly rubbing his right horn, "There's not much you can do without your spear."

Homura?

The woman from before flashed in my mind, remembering that I had walked into him tussling with her. It didn't look strenuous, but did I just observe the end of that fight? Noticing that he didn't have his spear out at this point was a little worrisome, as well. What had happened to it?

"You talk too much," Gabriel flexed his wings a little, tucking them back down.

"And you want to fight too much," Belphegor interjected, "Aren't you just a messenger? Shouldn't you be against fighting me?"

"I am here to complete a job."

"Which I'm sure will go swimmingly. Listen, we both know the ending to this dance. Either you lose your host, or I do. I'm fairly sure that the others

will go the same way."

"What do you mean...?" I cut in, standing up and moving to where I could see Belphegor wearing Choromatsu's body, "If you 'lose your host', will they die?"

"That's what they agreed to in the contract," The neutral look on Belphegor's face was sickening. I thought that if the Princes could be driven out, then everyone would be fine...but to find out that they'd lose everything they had...how desperate were the brothers when they contacted the Princes?

"Oh, that's a precious look on your face," I felt a warm finger underneath my chin, tilting my head upwards to look Belphegor in the eyes. He had a thin, pointed smile on his lips, "How Asmodeus would

kill

for that look."

I jerked my head away from him, recovering with a poor excuse of a glare as I took a step back, "I want you to leave my friends alone."

"Your friends...? Oh, the hosts," His smile turned a little wider, "No, that's not going to happen. You see, the contract they all signed says that either they finish their goal, or they perish trying."

"And what was their goal?"

"That's private information about our clientele, and I just can't give that out for free," Belphegor narrowed his eyes a little, the red glow flaring a little, "But if you want to make a deal, then I can tell you whatever you want."

"Enough," Gabriel grabbed Belphegor's arm and yanked him away from me, taking a step forward to block me from view, "You've done enough damage."

"Oh, and you haven't?!" Belphegor recovered quickly, snapping his fingers and sending more ignited papers towards Gabriel, "When your wing was

torn off, your host couldn't walk for several days and that was

with

your 'accelerated healing'. So much for being a 'blessed' host, right?"

Gabriel didn't respond. My imagination filled in the blanks, seeing a hobbled Karamatsu struggle to craft his instruments and his face wincing in pain as the wound on his back healed into a rigid scar.

'Don't get distracted!' A familiar voice shouted at me, echoing in my head as it snapped me out of the daydream. Gabriel landed at my feet and I wheeled backwards to avoid being hit by the Virtue. Several sheets of paper wrapped themselves around the remaining larger wing, filling the air with burning feathers and fabric, the smoke rising from the flames turning an unnatural color of copper.

"No...!" I reached for the papers, grabbing them and ripping them away from the wing. The fires were hot, just as hot as the ones in the air. I screamed as I curled away from the wing, having shredded several sheets before giving into the heat. My hands and arms felt like I had shoved them into burning coals, getting tense as the muscles fought against contracting. I felt a cool gust of wind cover my body, the relief not reaching my arms as I shakily looked up to see Gabriel standing without his wings. The papers that were attached to him fell away, their target no longer reachable.

"Leave (y/n) out of this," I heard Karamatsu's voice break through, gaining strength as he spoke. The visage of Gabriel in his full garb faded, leaving Karamatsu standing in front of me with a tense glare leveled at Belphegor.

"Oh? And what are you going to do about it?"

I saw the papers close to us shift a little, the red markings flaring back to life. I gasped as they raced towards Karamatsu's back, jumping up and catching most of them as they ignited again.

The pungent smell of human flesh raided my senses, barely registering that it was coming from me as the papers finally burnt up, their use expended.

My throat was sore, probably from screaming or smoke inhalation...or both.

"(Y/n)!" I heard two voices call out before I fell to the ground, my arms numb and curling inwards towards my chest against my will. Belphegor laughed as Karamatsu knelt by my side, his hands hovering over my arms as his face twisted into uncertainty.

"I wasn't supposed to hit you, but if you get in the way like that, (y/n), I'm not gonna stop the attack," Belphegor took a few steps towards me, the ends of the stole swaying with each footfall. Karamatsu turned around and glared at him, the air picking up around us again, "You still have enough energy for that?"

"I have enough to protect my friend from a demon," His voice shifted, taking on Gabriel's voice while his own remained strong. The pain in my arms lessened a little, but the skin remained unchanged, "And I know I can push you out of my little brother."

"Oh,

please

try," Belphegor sounded confident, a light scoff riding his tone, "Gabriel is not up to par for fighting, and you know it. You've spent so much energy on Homura that you didn't leave any to defend (y/n) or yourself...just like I was planning."

I could imagine the shock on Karamatsu's face, mirroring my own expression.

"I know! Me, the Prince of Sloth,

plan

something? Ridiculous as it sounds, I do make everything as easy as I can. Whether that's fighting Virtues, helping my brethren out, or even pursuing my own goals," Belphegor stood still, adjusting his glasses again as a

prideful smile stretched his lips thin, "Who knew that my own indolence could be used as a weapon?"

Karamatsu moved too quickly for me to follow, bursting upwards into Belphegor at a speed that rivaled the speed from the vision. His right hand gripped Belphegor's face tightly, each finger nearly digging into the skin as Karamatsu's left hand gripped the cassock front tightly. The momentum of the hit threw both of them to the ground, with Karamatsu straddling Belphegor and straining to stay on top as the man underneath struggled to throw him off.

"No...!" Belphegor yelled, one of his hands reaching up and grabbing a fistful of Karamatsu's hair, "You bastards...you don't know what you've done!"

"You're the next one," The dual voice of Karamatsu growled out, his glowing gold eyes revealing the clenched face of Belphegor as the Prince struggled to get out from underneath him.

"(Y/n), they just killed Osomatsu...!" I couldn't tell if it was Belphegor or Choromatsu that called to me, but hearing the terrified plea in his voice drove a knife into my heart, "They're gonna kill me next...!"

"Don't listen, (y/n)!" Karamatsu grunted, pulling his head away from Belphegor's grip, "He's trying to fool you..."

"No, I'm not!" I fully heard Choromatsu's voice, startled by the whine in his tone, "(Y/n), save me!"

I quickly glanced between the two brothers, unsure of what to do until my feet made my decision for me. Lowering my shoulder, I collided with Karamatsu and stumbled over Choromatsu, pushing them away from each other as I fell to the ground, the nerves in my arms screaming out in pain.

"Thanks," Choromatsu's voice sounded relieved before a hand grabbed my hair, yanking my head up to see Karamatsu recovering on the ground a meter away from me, "You're such a loyal person."

"Bel...phegor," I gritted between my teeth, a growing anger roiling in my stomach as I quickly realized that I played into his hands, "Leave us alone...!"

"With Satan gone, you're of no use anymore," His knee pressed against my back as his hand pressed something against my neck, thin and sharp, "Sorry, (y/n). No hard feelings, and say 'hello' to Osomatsu in hell."

'Not here...and definitely not by him,' The familiar voice echoed in my head, sounding so close to someone I knew but the pitch was off. I gasped as an angled blade raced along the ground towards my head, pulling up at the last moment and cutting clean through Belphegor's hand and arm. The Prince on top of me staggered back with a yell of pain, warm fluid splattering on top of my body as someone new squatted in front of me.

Most of what the person was wearing was stained black, only a dark red shirt revealing itself as Karamatsu walked closer. The outline revealed that they were wearing a long black cloak and hood, the front opened to reveal the shirt and black pants with straps hanging from the waist. The person's face lit up as their eyes began to glow a sickly green color, revealing a semi-familiar smirk as they extended a gloved hand towards me.

'Stand up,' His mouth barely moved, the voice speaking in my head. I reached towards his hand, feeling the worn leather before being pulled up into a standing position.

"You're not supposed to interfere," Karamatsu remarked as he passed us, tugging on his shirt collar as a frown settled on his lips.

'I believe we agreed to 'within reason' this time,' The man turned his eyes towards Karamatsu, the smirk widening as he released my hand. Karamatsu glanced back before focusing on the groaning Belphegor on the ground, the damage fully exposed under his sight.

His left arm was cut completely off, the wrist hanging on by a shred of skin and leaving the shoulder joint exposed as the Prince twitched in pain. My eyes widened at the carnage before a gloved hand covered them, curling their arm inwards with my head and pushing it into their chest. I clung to

whoever the green-eyed man was, his presence an odd calm among the chaos that had just happened.

"It's time to end this, Belphegor."

I couldn't hear a response through the incoherent crying and screaming, the sound cutting off mid-breath. The sudden silence was deafening.

"Leave her to me...I'll take care of it."

The chest I was partially leaning against vanished, completely disappearing as someone else grabbed the back of my shirt, catching me from falling and pulling me into a gentle embrace from behind. Their breathing was fluttering, as if fighting a panic attack, their arms pressing me closer without aggravating my burns.

"(Y/n)..." Karamatsu's breath danced over my hair, "I'm so sorry that this happened, and I regret not being able to help you and keep you safe."

"What happened...?" I felt something hot drip onto my cheeks, unsure of what it was.

"When you wake up, you won't remember a thing. Find a place to work, save up for your own apartment, and live happily without us."

"Karamatsu, don't...! Tell me what's going on!" I fought against his hold, a sinking feeling swelling in my stomach.

"Be good, and I'm sorry," Karamatsu's hand covered my eyes, feeling the tear-tracks on my face as I tried to pull away from him. I didn't know what was going to happen, but everything in me wanted to fight against it. A glow flooded my eyes, the golden color gentle at first before a headache pounded in my skull.

The light grew brighter and brighter until I couldn't see anything, the light swallowing my senses.

"Hey, miss," I heard a voice call out, feeling something poking my forearm before a hand patted my back, "Miss, are you awake? Are you alive?"

"Oh, I'm sorry..." I groaned as I opened my eyes to see a clear blue sky, a young man kneeling near me with a phone in his free hand, "I must've passed out..."

"Do you need anything?" Worry was etched on his face, putting the phone away and holding out a hand to me, "You look famished."

"I..." I looked down at myself, seeing the red long-sleeve shirt and black jeans I had left the apartment in a few days ago. My stomach answered the question for me, and I awkwardly laughed while smiling, "Yeah, something small to eat would be nice."

"My wife's cooking up some lunch for me and the boys. You're welcome to join us."

I took his hand and stood up, looking at my surroundings to see that I had fallen asleep next to an expansive farm field that was settled near a city. Taking a breath in, I brushed off the road dirt and followed the farmer to his home, happy to have some help after being kicked out of the apartment.

Extra: Roles Explained

So, I feel like a lot of my research will not make sense to some people. Hence why this section exists.

To mention first, I used the assigned Akuma/Demon roles that the brothers were given through the tower defense game

Hesokuri Wars ~Battle of the NEETs~

:

Osomatsu - Satan

Karamatsu - Beelzebub

Choromatsu - Belphegor

Ichimatsu - Leviathan

Jyushimatsu - Mammon

Todomatsu - Asmodeus

I recognized the names after a quick Google search that the staff of

Hesokuri Wars

were using either The Lanterne of Light's classification of demons or Binsfield's classification (both are based on the seven deadly sins, with The Lanterne of Light's anonymous publication being dated earlier in 1409 -1410, while Binsfield's publication was in 1589).

Layman's terms? These were the new roles I labeled for the brothers:

Osomatsu - Satan (Wrath)

Karamatsu - Beelzebub (Gluttony)

Choromatsu - Belphegor (Sloth)

Ichimatsu - Leviathan (Envy)

Jyushimatsu - Mammon (Greed)

Todomatsu - Asmodeus (Lust)

Now with a classification to go by, I assigned each brother their counterpart, the seven contrary virtues:

Osomatsu - Patience

Karamatsu - Abstinence

Choromatsu - Diligence

Ichimatsu - Kindness

Jyushimatsu - Liberality

Todomatsu - Chastity

This didn't make sense to me (since I already had my ending fights already paired up before I started), so I tweaked it further to knock some roles out of the lineup. I wanted to keep the determined positions the same, so I switched some aspects around and that left me with this new list:

Osomatsu - Satan (Wrath)

Karamatsu - Diligence [I've never really seen any of the brothers work as hard as him to be liked, despite being timid]

Choromatsu - Belphegor (Sloth)

Ichimatsu - Chastity [I took this to be defined as 'the ability to refrain from being distracted and influenced by hostility, temptation or corruption', since

the true definition of the word describes what our beloved NEETs struggle with...]

Jyushimatsu - Patience [He hasn't gotten really mad often in the show]

Todomatsu - Asmodeus (Lust)

With these new roles, I had to find the angel counterparts for my non-demon boys (aka, something for tension). A harder Google search brought me what I needed, and the final role list turned into the following:

Osomatsu - Satan (Wrath)

Karamatsu - Gabriel (Diligence)

Choromatsu - Belphegor (Sloth)

Ichimatsu - Uriel (Chastity)

Jyushimatsu - Azrael (Patience)

Todomatsu - Asmodeus (Lust)

Now that you know the 'behind-the-scenes' research, you should be able to think back on each fight between the brothers to see their virtues/vices reflect their fighting style and how they responded to their enemy. Reread the story if you'd like, and enjoy the small details that are threaded throughout.

As a side note, did you want me to put this kind of detailed background work in my other/future stories? I know that my stories do take a while to be fully published, but would you guys like this kind of summary after they're finished? Let me know.